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WISE AS A SERPENT.

VOL. III.

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WISE AS A SERPENT.

BY

J. A. ST. JOHN BLYTHE.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.

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WISE AS A SERPENT.

CHAPTER I.

A PARTING AND A MEETING.

FRANK WELLWOOD'S heart beat almost to suffocation when Pauline Lisle's answer to his letter was placed in his hands, and when he had opened it, he was obliged to lay it down on the table to read; to do so while he held it in his trembling hands was simply impossible. To do her justice, Pauline had not tortured her victim unnecessarily; he had not to ramble through whole pages of weak sentimentality before he could gather what her answer was. The first few lines sent a thrill through him; and by the time he had finished the letter he was hardly a sane man. All his gloomy forebodings and unhappy thoughts were gone. Pauline had con-

fessed that she did feel now that she loved him, and had promised to be his wife as soon as he could gain her father's consent to the marriage. Frank reproached himself bitterly for ever having doubted her for a moment, or allowed the hard thoughts to arise in his mind, which had, to say the truth, more than once forced themselves in, about the way in which she had treated him. She clearly had acted in a perfectly straightforward way all the time, and he had no business to blame her, because circumstances had thrown her into a position in which it was, he admitted now, very difficult indeed for her to know exactly how to act.

Then, according to Pauline's desire, Frank sat down and wrote a long letter to Mr. Lisle. It was rather a difficult one to accomplish. He had no great liking for him, and some misgivings as to what his answer might be. Frank had a shrewd suspicion that both Mr. and Mrs. Lisle had set their hearts on Pauline making a splendid marriage. He wrote a long letter, too, to Pauline herself; that was easy enough to get through; he could have added a whole quire with ease to what he did write. He implored her to do the utmost she could to prevent any obstacles being thrown in the way of their

marriage, for all his hopes now were dependent on that. The next day seemed like a very faint echo of the past. It was terribly anxious work; but surely the next morning's post would bring him an answer. He was not disappointed. Mr. Lisle's letter was very short: he was not partial to letter writing at any time. He said that in such a matter he should not dream of exercising any authority. Pauline must please herself; it was a matter that concerned her happiness, not his; only he would rather the marriage should not take place immediately. Pauline was very young, and he would rather she waited a year, or, perhaps, eighteen months. He would not, he said, have insisted on this, only he found that Pauline herself was not averse to the arrangement, and Mrs. Lisle was very anxious it should be so settled, therefore he begged it might be considered so.

Pauline not averse to it! was it really so? Frank winced a little at the idea, and tore open a letter from her, which accompanied her father's. It was very loving and gentle, and told him that she was so utterly and hopelessly ignorant of everything that a wife ought to know, that he must give her a little time to learn her duties, for they were never well learnt, if the

learning was put off until the time for practice came. He must remember, she told him, that she was more than half a Frenchwoman; and she was sure a French wife would never suit him, therefore he must give her time to learn to be an Englishwoman. So Frank was obliged to give in, and solace himself with the prospect of a speedy visit to Atherley, where Pauline bade him appear as soon as possible.

It was with a sigh of relief that Mrs. Lisle had seen her husband's letter to Frank dropped into the post-bag. No one knew the difficulty she had had to contend with before she could get that letter written. In the first instance Mr. Lisle flatly refused to have anything to do with it.

"Pauline can please herself," he said; "I'm not going to interfere. If she chooses to marry the fellow she can, and settle her own time too."

"No, but you must write," remonstrated his wife, "and say what Pauline wishes."

"Be hanged if I do, then," retorted Mr. Lisle. "Why can't you write yourself, if you are so anxious about it?"

"Because you are the proper person to do it."

"But I hate writing letters."

"Nonsense," exclaimed his wife, rather an-

grily; "I tell you you must do it. It 'll seem strange enough, as it is, when it comes out that you can give Pauline nothing, without your refusing to have anything to say about her marriage as well."

This last argument told, and after a little more contention, Mrs. Lisle carried her point.

"I didn't think I should have succeeded in getting him to write it, my dear," Mrs. Lisle said to her daughter.

"It is very well for him that he has done it," Pauline answered.

"Why?" asked her mother.

"Because if he had not done it for you, I should have been obliged to make him do it myself, and I don't much think he would have liked that."

Mrs. Lisle felt no doubt on that point. "When will Frank come down?" she asked.

"I have told him to come at once. I suppose that was the proper thing to do?"

"Pauline!" Mrs. Lisle exclaimed earnestly, "I do wish you would tell me whether you intend to marry him or not."

"And as I told you before, mother, that depends upon circumstances which I cannot foresee."

"Then why did you positively accept him?"

"Simply because I couldn't help it," replied Pauline.

"Couldn't help it!" repeated her mother.

"No. Frank had reached the point, beyond which a man cannot be held without a positive answer; so I gave it him."

This answer threw a little light upon the subject for Mrs. Lisle, and she felt considerably consoled thereby.

"I should like very much to see Mrs. Darryll," Pauline said, after a pause.

"Why don't you go over and call, then?"

"I don't quite care to do that," she answered. "Don't you want to go to Stowminster?"

"I can easily find an excuse for going, if you wish it."

"I do wish it, mamma, very much. If you go, I will go too."

The excuse was readily found, and they set out. That partial explanation about Pauline's engagement to Frank, had made Mrs. Lisle throw herself much more heartily into her daughter's plans. It had removed the terrible dread she had felt, up to that moment, that Pauline might, even yet, make a fool of herself.

"If Mrs. Darryll is at home, mamma," Pauline

said, as the carriage drove in at the priory gates, "you can leave me here. I suppose you won't be very long in Stowminster."

"Just as long as you please, my dear."

Mrs. Darryll was at home. "Come back in half an hour, mamma," Pauline said, as she got out; and Mrs. Lisle drove away.

"Didn't I see Mrs. Lisle in the carriage?" Mrs. Darryll said, as she entered the drawing-room.

"Yes. She is coming to see you presently. She has one or two things to do in Stowminster, so she is gone on to do them, and she will come in as she comes back. But now do tell me how you are, I am so anxious to know."

"I can assure you, my dear Pauline, I have been very ill indeed since I saw you. Maud was quite in a fright about me, and insisted on my seeing Doctor Marsh. I shouldn't have done it but to please her. I do hate doctors so thoroughly; but Doctor Marsh is charming. He is such a dear old man, though he scolded me dreadfully!"

"What for?"

"He said I had been neglecting my health most dreadfully, and threatened me with all kinds of horrible maladies."

"Oh, Mrs. Darryll!" said Pauline, in a tone of distress.

"He did indeed, I can assure you. He said I had run a great risk through neglecting my health."

The tears rose in Pauline's eyes. "How could you do so?" she said. "I knew you were more ill than you would allow, and it made me quite unhappy."

"You dear, silly, little thing!" said Mrs. Darryll, kissing her, "it is all right now. Doctor Marsh has taken me in hand, and I am better already. Besides, I am to go away soon, for change."

"Go away!" exclaimed Pauline. Where are you going?"

"I don't know yet. To Switzerland, I think very likely, for a few weeks. Guy is going to the north about the end of the month, and as the dean and Maud are going away for a short time too, I don't care to stay here, so we are going away. I shouldn't have consented to go, if Maud had been staying at the deanery."

"Mrs. Darryll!" exclaimed Pauline, vehemently, "I wish you were not so fond of Miss Vernon."

"Pauline!" said Mrs. Darryll.

Pauline bit her lips. "I can't take it back, because it is the truth; but I didn't mean to let it out," she said.

"Why should you wish to take away the one thing that makes my life happy?"

"I don't want to take away what makes your life happy. I only want to take away what I am sure endangers its happiness very much. But I didn't mean to say that. Perhaps I am wrong."

"What do you mean?" asked Mrs. Darryll, uneasily.

"I mean that I fear unhappiness may come to you through your love for Miss Vernon, and I cannot bear to think of it; but I didn't mean to say anything. I daresay it is only my foolish fancy. I daresay I am a little jealous," she added. "You must forget what I said, dear Mrs. Darryll."

"But indeed I shall do no such thing. I cannot think what you mean. I wish you would speak plainly."

"I really have nothing to speak plainly about —it is only a fancy of mine. Indeed, you mustn't think anything more about it. Ah! here comes mamma. Now, mamma, say, doesn't Mrs. Darryll look better already? She

says she has put herself into Doctor Marsh's hands."

"Much better. I am rejoiced to see it," Mrs. Lisle answered. The diversion was successful. Mrs. Darryll plunged into a faithful account of her maladies, and Pauline contrived, without much difficulty, to keep her on the topic till they left.

"Don't you think Mrs. Darryll is very much altered, Pauline?" Mrs. Lisle asked, as they drove home.

"In what way?"

"In appearance, I mean. She looks older, and, I think, far from well."

"She is looking much better than she was the last time I saw her," Pauline answered. "But mamma, I was thinking about Frank coming down. Would'nt it suit you better if he came about the end of the month, than just at present?"

Mrs. Lisle hesitated. She did not exactly know what she had better say.

"The Darrylls, and Sir Guy Rivers, are going away for some time, about the end of the month," Pauline continued, "and——"

"Ah yes," interrupted her mother, "and I want, very much, to persuade Mr. and Mrs.

Darryll to spend a few days at Atherley, before the Christmas visiting is all over. Yes, certainly; it will be much better Frank should come afterwards. Will you write yourself, my love, or shall I write and tell him so?"

"I will write," replied Pauline.

"I suppose he can get leave then just as well as at once?"

"Quite as well."

"I am sorry to disappoint you, my love," Mrs. Lisle said, with a little quiet smile.

Pauline turned upon her in a moment, with flashing eyes. "Mamma, I won't have any sort of jesting about Frank."

"My dear child—," began Mrs. Lisle, but Pauline interrupted her, half fiercely.

"No, I don't want to hear anything more about it. I know quite well what you meant, and you fancy you know what I mean, but you don't. Perhaps you will, some day, perhaps you never will. But remember in future, not a word of jesting on the subject."

What did she mean? Mrs. Lisle had fancied that she had begun to see some light on the subject; but now she felt more mystified than ever. She had certainly made a false step. Pauline was most incomprehensible to her, and

again doubts and fears about Frank Wellwood began to rise in the mind.

What did Pauline mean? was the question which was at that moment occupying Mrs. Darryll's mind, as well as Mrs. Lisle's, and causing her considerably more uneasiness. What could she have meant by her sudden and unexpected exclamation about Maud Vernon? "Why should she wish I was not so fond of her? She said she was a little jealous, but it can't be that. She spoke so vehemently too, as if there was something behind; as if she knew something, which she did not choose to say. I wonder what it can be?" Mrs. Darryll tormented herself on the subject, in vain; but, at the same time, to an extent by no means calculated to exercise a soothing influence on her irritable nature, as Maud found out before the day was over; though what it was was wrong, it was not so easy to tell. Isabel, after long consideration of the subject, had resolved to watch, and see if she could not find out what it was that Pauline meant; and so she said nothing about her visit.

Maud met Doctor Marsh a few mornings after, just as he was leaving the priory.

"Is Mrs. Darryll still on your books?" she asked.

"Not exactly, but I look in sometimes to see her. I find," he added, with a smile, "that she takes very kindly to any such little attentions, in spite of her declared objection to doctors, in their professional character."

"Do you think she is really better?" Maud asked.

"Better than when I saw her first after my return, most decidedly. She says she sleeps much better, and that alone is a great point gained. There are still a few symptoms I don't like, but I hope to see them disappear, as others have done, in a short time. Sir Guy is at the priory, I suppose, is he not?"

"Well, he sleeps there, I believe," Maud answered, laughing, "but I don't think they see much more of him than that. You know he and Isabel never could get on very well."

"My dear Miss Maud, I really don't wonder. Mrs. Darryll is all very well as an ordinary acquaintance. Under those circumstances, I can quite well understand any one liking her extremely; but preserve one from anything like intimacy."

"I am very glad to hear you say so, for I have sometimes felt a little inclined to reproach myself for feeling so—so—very—what shall I

call it? I am afraid, in truth, I must say, so very tired of her; and yet I really liked her very much, when first I knew her; but she seems to change so, as one comes to know more of her."

"Of course she does. When first she knows you, she is so extremely anxious you should like her, that her whole attention is absorbed in that, and it alters her, so completely, that it is not until you have known her some time, her character really begins to come out. I wonder how she and Darryll really get on?"

"They have not been married quite a year yet, you know," Maud replied.

"A highly suggestive answer, certainly."

"I think the outburst I told you of, just before you returned, was the first disagreement they have ever had, at least of a serious nature; but I have never alluded to the subject again with either. I thought it best dropped with Isabel, and I did not then quite like the tone in which Edgar spoke. Though he certainly behaves very well to her, I cannot help thinking her fortune had more to do with the marriage than herself. But now, good-bye, I must leave you here."

"A dear bargain, at any price," Doctor Marsh muttered, as he walked away; and then

he turned round and watched Maud's retreating figure, and wondered whether it was only his fancy, or whether there was really less elasticity about her step than there had been a short time since. Would not a stranger, looking at her now, have pronounced her a great deal older than he would have done a month ago? The burden of his lamentations was somewhat changed now. His regret was even stronger, that Isabel Darryll had ever come to the priory, than that Maud and Guy Rivers had ever met. He did not feel half so anxious on that point as he had done before he knew what Maud's influence over Guy was: but Isabel he could not think by any means safe, or ever likely to be; and she would be a constant reminder to Maud of the danger hanging over her, and a constant source of worry and anxiety as well.

The gossips of Stowminster were beginning to be very uneasy on the subject of Sir Guy Rivers and Miss Vernon. Were they engaged, or were they not? That connection between the priory and the deanery grounds was most unfortunate, for it quite prevented any investigations on the subject of the frequency of Sir Guy's visits to the deanery. But for that the point would have been easily settled. As it

was, there was much difficulty. Sir Guy was a great deal at the priory, and Miss Vernon very often rode with him, and Mr. and Mrs. Darryll; but, if they did come through Stowminster, they were always either riding all four abreast, or else Miss Vernon and Mr. Darryll were together. Then too, both Mrs. and Miss Lisle said everywhere they did not believe the report, and Miss Lisle was so intimate with Mrs. Darryll, she would be sure to have heard. Mrs. Lisle, too, had once or twice spoken in a very meaning tone on the subject, as if she knew more than she chose to say; so, altogether, the subject was very perplexing. Maud would have been highly amused at some of the angling for information that went on, had she not been too much preoccupied to notice it. In ten days more Guy was going, and she should not see him for what seemed a very long time.

These ten days slipped away very fast. Closely Maud watched him during the whole time, and every day she breathed more freely. She had never, since she had known him, seen him so free from everything like excitability. Surely his recovering so instantly from the effect of his visit to Archerfield was a hopeful sign. At last she put the question to Doctor Marsh, who

since the morning, when he had given her his report of Mrs. Darryll, had strictly obeyed her injunctions.

"Yes, most undoubtedly, it is a very good sign," he answered. "In fact, all that I have noticed about Sir Guy of late, is good. You are certainly a sorceress."

"Just what he says," Maud answered, with a brighter smile than Doctor Marsh had seen on her face since his return. And so, both she and Dr. Marsh rejoiced in a result, of the cause of which they were entirely ignorant. Neither dreamed that Sir Guy was in something like the position of a drunken man, suddenly sobered by a violent shock. They did not know how much of his quiet, almost subdued manner, was the result of his vivid remembrance of that scene in the conservatory at Riverston vicarage.

The last day came, and Guy spent the greater part of it talking to Maud in the deanery drawing-room.

"Three months of the hated year gone," he said. "They've gone awfully slowly though; nine more—oh, Maud!"

"Don't look beyond the present moment," she said. "They will pass quickly enough, if you don't think so much about it."

"Oh, will they though? Look here; I declare, if the dean hadn't been so awfully cautious, we might have been married by this time."

"Was he not quite right?" Maud asked.

Sir Guy bit his lip. How right he had been, Maud little knew.

"I certainly didn't know before, what a reckless fellow I am," replied Sir Guy. "I've had a sharp lesson. I dread this six weeks in the North," he added.

"Why?" asked Maud, anxiously.

"I don't know, exactly. Because I shan't see you all the time, I think. I wish it was over, and then I shall begin to work hard at Riverston, and pass the time that way. But I do wish I was back again safe."

Guy was going up to London that night, by the mail; so when Maud rose from dinner, he rose also.

"Good-bye, Mr. Dean," he said. "I have only just time to walk up to the priory, before I must start."

"Good-bye," the dean said. "God bless you, my dear boy."

There was more genuine affection in his tone, than Sir Guy had ever heard, and he wrung

his hand in silence, and followed Maud to the drawing-room.

"Oh Maud! Maud!" he exclaimed, "I cannot bear to go. I feel as if it was for ever."

"You must not indulge such fancies," Maud answered. "The time will soon pass."

"No, it will not. Maud, I am sure something evil is impending; what can it be?"

"You have no evil to fear, Guy, save from yourself."

"Yes, I know, I know. Oh, if I might only take you with me."

He stood just as he had stood with her in his mother's rooms at Riverston; stroking back the hair from the forehead, and looking down upon her, with a face in which love and sadness were strangely mingled.

"This will never do," he said hoarsely, at last. "I must go. Maud, Maud, my guardian angel," he added, with a strange intense earnestness in his tone, "pray for me, my darling, that your blessed influence may follow me, and save me, if need be, from myself."

He folded her in his arms as he spoke, and kissed her again, and again. "Mine, mine, till death us do part," he murmured; and then, with one long last kiss, he suddenly released her, and

went, like a man who dared not pause for a moment.

Maud stood where he had left her, struggling for composure. His foreboding words had affected her, more than she liked to feel, and it was not without a considerable effort that she could succeed in shaking off the gloomy feeling they had brought over her.

Those ten days which had flown so rapidly and brightly to her, had dragged out their weary length, as if they never would pass, to Frank Wellwood. The same day that Guy Rivers left Stowminster, was the day fixed for his arrival at Atherley. Nearly a month had he been engaged, positively, to Pauline, and yet he had not seen her. He thought the time would never pass, even though London seemed by no means the dreary place to him now, which it had done when he had met Doctor Marsh. Frank had been very anxious to write and tell him the happy termination of his sorrows, but this Pauline had positively forbidden; threatening to draw back from the engagement, if Frank ventured to make it known to any one. Her reasons, she said, she would give him when they met.

Mrs. Lisle met him in the hall, when he

arrived at Atherley, and bestowed upon him a tolerably affectionate maternal kiss.

"Pauline is in the drawing-room," she whispered, "waiting for you;" and in another moment Frank had bestowed a much more affectionate greeting upon her, than he had received. Pauline was quiet, graceful, and undemonstrative, but fascinating as ever.

Mrs. Lisle came in to the drawing-room, before very long, dressed for dinner. "Now Pauline," she said, "go away and dress; you always take a long time, and besides, I have a few words to say to this young man before he goes up to dress."

"I hope they are not very formidable ones, Mrs. Lisle," he said, as Pauline glided quietly out of the room.

"Not very, but I must have you clearly understand this matter. I won't conceal from you that both Mr. Lisle and I have given our consent rather unwillingly to this engagement. Perhaps you will think us very mercenary, but you cannot wonder that we are both very proud of our beautiful child; and I must confess we are both rather disappointed; we had calculated on her making a more brilliant marriage. You see I deal very frankly with you."

"I quite understand you, Mrs. Lisle, nor am I surprised at what you say. You may well be proud of her, and I can quite understand your feeling a little disappointed. But one thing I can truly say, Pauline might have made a more brilliant marriage, but she would never have made one in which her happiness will be more earnestly and entirely considered."

"I know that, quite well, and I know, too, how thoroughly disinterested the dear child is. All she would for a moment consider in such a case, would be, whether she loved a man or not. She would never have a thought beyond that. But then, you know, parents are apt to take a rather more prosaic matter-of-fact view of such matters. They must look forward, more than their children are disposed to do."

"Of course, it is quite right that they should," Frank replied, not knowing exactly what to say. He by no means saw clearly the drift of Mrs. Lisle's discourse.

"I am glad to find you are so sensible about it, and don't think us very cruel for refusing to allow the marriage to take place directly. But the fact is, I and Mr. Lisle both feel a little uneasy on the subject."

"In what way, Mrs. Lisle?"

"Why, you see, Pauline is very young, and a most artless unsophisticated creature and—in short—I can't help feeling a little dread, whether she quite knows her own mind."

"Mrs. Lisle!" exclaimed Frank, more utterly bewildered than ever. "Do you mean that Pauline ——?"

"No, do not misunderstand me for a moment. Pauline knows nothing of this. She, dear child, believes she loves you to distraction. All I want to say is this, that considering how little she has seen of the world, and the peculiar position in which you have stood to one another, her father and I feel a little uneasy on the subject. It is chiefly for that reason we have insisted on a delay; and I warn you, that should we see any reason, during that time, to think that Pauline has been at all mistaken, as to her own feelings, we shall insist on her breaking off the engagement. It has been hard to me to say this. I know it must seem cruel to you, but you must remember we have to think, first, of our own child. Were she older, and more experienced, it would have been quite a different case; but it is our duty to see that her ignorance of life does not lead her into taking any step which she may afterwards regret. Do you quite understand me?"

"Perfectly," was Frank's cool answer.

"Ah, that is well, and now you must go and dress for dinner. I have kept you so long, you have positively only ten minutes, and Mr. Lisle cannot bear to be kept waiting."

"He won't have to wait for me," Frank replied; and his light step up stairs did not seem to imply that Mrs. Lisle's information had produced any very severe depression on his spirits.

"Understand!" he soliloquized, as he hastily dressed for dinner, "I should think I do understand. In plain English, just this—'If a better chance comes in Pauline's way, and we can make her give in, young man you must turn out.' That's about what it comes to, I think. Worldly-minded old schemer! How on earth could such a woman ever have a child like Pauline? Make her give up a man she really loves for the sake of a fortune, indeed, I should like to see them try." Frank laughed heartily at the bare idea, and went down stairs with the old dislike he had always felt for Mrs. Lisle considerably increased.

"Ah, youngster, is that you?" Mr. Lisle exclaimed, as he entered the drawing-room. "Well, you made good use of your time at

Riverston, I think. But not yet, not yet, mind. She's too young for double harness, yet; would'nt go steady. Ah, there's dinner, that's a blessing. Off you go."

Frank followed Mrs. Lisle and Pauline to the drawing-room the moment he could escape after dinner, in hopes of a few words with her; but Mrs. Lisle was there, calmly knitting, and not even disposed apparently for a nap. Frank began to feel rather sulky.

"Come and look at my flowers," Pauline said, after he had been a short time in the drawing-room. "I have taken to flowers to a great extent lately, and I have some beautiful ones in the conservatory."

"I should like to see them of all things," Frank exclaimed. He really knew about as much of flowers as he did of Sanscrit.

"Never mind the flowers," Pauline said, when they were in the conservatory. "Sit down here and tell me what that mysterious conference before dinner was about."

Frank told her what had passed; not quite in the plain and unvarnished manner in which he had stated the truth to himself while dressing for dinner, however.

Pauline smiled. "I know mamma doesn't like

it. She is disappointed; but surely one must know best what is for one's own happiness. Wealth and splendour can't bring happiness," she added, with a sigh.

"And love can, can't it?" Frank said.

"I believe it is the only thing that can; but Frank——"

"But what, darling?"

"I can't help feeling a little uneasy still about the sort of position we have held with respect to each other for so long. It seems to make passing into a new one so hard."

"What, still dwelling on that, Pauline? I thought all that was over."

"So did I; but that idea of mamma's seems to call it up again. It's not so much about myself, I was thinking, as about you. You don't really know me, I believe."

"If you knew all these last few months have cost me, your fears would soon disappear."

"Ah, but you don't know how many faults I have."

"Oh, bother all that rubbish," Frank exclaimed, rather impatiently. "You are mine now, Pauline, and I mean to hold you, my beauty; so let's have no more regrets and fears. Life's too short for all that kind of thing."

"Yes, but Frank, there is one other thing."

"What's that?"

"I know lots of people fancy I'm an heiress. I hope you havn't any idea of that kind in your head."

"Pauline, how can you ask such a question?" Frank exclaimed, indignantly.

"No, I didn't mean to imply that you were mercenary, Frank; don't think that; but you don't know all the truth. You don't know how much indebted I am to my estimable father," she added, very bitterly, "for having brought me up here, in the midst of every luxury; and calmly squandered, all the time, every farthing that ought to have been mine. And then told me my face and figure were fortune enough for any girl."

"Pauline! You are not in earnest?"

"Indeed I am, Frank. You don't know what my life has been."

"My poor child," he said, "you'll have something then, to gain by the change, even though your mother may not think so. But tell me why you won't let me tell any one of our engagement?"

"I don't like it, Frank. You know people say hard things of me already, and they would

be more censorious still, if they knew I was engaged."

"Well, as you will, dear; but I wish you were not so particular."

"Yes, I am very particular on that point; more so than on any other. You must keep it quite quiet."

"Pauline, my child, come and make tea," Mrs. Lisle called from the drawing-room.

"Coming, mamma," replied Pauline, and then turning to Frank, she clasped her hands round his arm, and looking up in his face with an earnest look, she said—"Frank, whatever happens, will you always remember, that since I was an infant, everything has been done that could be done, to make me all that a woman ought not to be. Remember that, and if you have to blame, don't be harsh."

She was gone before he had time to answer.

Mrs. Wellwood was in the seventh heaven, when Frank and Pauline rode over together to pay her a visit at Riverston.

"Frank looks ten years younger than he did when he last went away from here, my dear," she said to Pauline.

"Does he, auntie? Poor fellow, I am afraid he was more unhappy than I ever dreamed of his being."

"Indeed he was, Pauline. I always thought you did not know how dearly he loved you. Ah! you will be a happy woman, my dear child."

"Are you quite sure, auntie?"

"As sure as one can be of anything in this world. Frank will make you a good husband; and you will be a good wife to him, will you not, my darling?"

"I don't doubt Frank making a good husband," Pauline answered. "Beyond that, I'm not prepared to answer your question."

"But you will make him a good wife, I know, dear, because you love him. Ah, Pauline; you don't know yet how much real happiness there is to be found in this world, simply by making others happy."

"If my happiness is to depend upon my doing that, I suspect it will go into a very small compass," Pauline replied, laughing as she spoke; but the laugh was not a pleasant one. There was no merriment in it.

"You must not say that, my dear," answered her aunt, gravely. "You have too low an opinion of yourself. When you are in happier circumstances, you will view things very differently."

Pauline laughed again, a harder colder laugh than before: but she made no answer.

"Why are you not to be married sooner?" Mrs. Wellwood asked.

"Papa won't hear of it," she replied, "though I don't believe, at heart, he cares much about it. I think it is mamma's doing. She doesn't like the marriage, I know."

"Why not?" asked Mrs. Wellwood, a little indignantly.

"Oh, she likes Frank very much," Pauline said, answering the tone, more than the words; "but you know, auntie, mamma is as prejudiced as most mammas; and she had set her heart on some very brilliant marriage for me, I think, and so she is rather disappointed."

"Louisa is quite wrong then," Mrs. Wellwood answered, with some asperity. "I should have thought experience might have taught her to know better."

"What do you mean?" Pauline asked.

The question rather startled Mrs. Wellwood. She had gone back, in thought, to years long gone; and to the remembrance of much that her niece had had to bear, in the earlier days of her married life; and which had seemed rather a dear price to pay for her achievement to a place among the county families, and Mrs. Wellwood had quite forgotten, for the moment,

that it was to that niece's child she was speaking.

"I mean, my dear," she said, after a moment's hesitation, "that I should think your mother must have seen quite enough of life, to know that wealth and splendour can't give happiness."

"It seems to me," Pauline said, "that people are considerably more ready to admit that in theory than in practice."

"They only see the outside of other people's lives, you know; and gilding hides a great deal. When they come to experience, then they understand better. But I do wish you were to be married sooner, Pauline. I don't like long engagements."

"I wish I wasn't going to be married at all, sometimes," Pauline exclaimed, passionately. "I almost wish I could make up my mind to give it all up, and go into a convent; like that one near Paris we used to go to sometimes. It looked so calm and peaceful. I wonder if the nuns were really happy."

"Pauline! my dear child! what do you mean?" asked Mrs. Wellwood, in blank astonishment. "Go into a convent! Why, you're not a Roman Catholic, I hope?"

"Better be that, if I was a sincere one, than what I am. A stray waif, without a principle of any kind to hold on to. No, you needn't look so horror-stricken, auntie. I'm not going to do anything rash, only I do think it would have been happier for Frank if he had bestowed his affection elsewhere."

She spoke like herself again now, but Mrs. Wellwood was rather disturbed. This was not the first of those sudden outbursts from Pauline to which she had been a witness, and she did not like them. She thought they seemed to show that she was not happy about something.

Pauline, in truth, began to find out now that her part was a harder one to play than she had anticipated. A feeling within was struggling for life, which, if successful, might have changed all her future career, and she had a sharp contest, sometimes, to keep it down. The contest was all the sharper too, now Frank was there, and she wished his leave was over. "Give it all up," a voice seemed sometimes to whisper to her; but her response was always "Never." She had heard a good deal of what had been said about both her mother and herself in the county. The bitter comments, and sneering prophecies that their schemes would fail,

and in deep resentment she had vowed that she would leave no means untried to achieve for herself a position from which she could return scorn and contempt with advantage; and was she going to give up for a foolish piece of romantic sentimentality now? Never, whatever it might cost her! But still! if it had only been any one else!

No trace of the struggle appeared, however; quiet, graceful, gentle she always was. As ever, a faultless piece of acting; and if Frank did sometimes feel just a little disappointed that there was not a little more warmth about her, he consoled himself with the reflection that there was something inexpressibly charming in her perfect repose and even temper, and that he would soon teach her to be a little more demonstrative, when he got her fairly away from the shallow, heartless set among whom she lived.

CHAPTER II.

BREAKERS AHEAD!

THE six weeks that Sir Guy Rivers had fixed as the term of his banishment from Stowminster deanery had fairly doubled, and still he had not returned. The dean and Maud had been home some time, and so, of course, had been Isabel Darryll; the latter seeming much better, though Doctor Marsh still looked a little grave at times. Maud looked much better too, and found plenty of occupation in soothing, by long letters, Sir Guy's impatient fretting under the long and vexatious delays which still kept him prisoner in the north. Not, he confessed, that he should have any cause to complain, if only Maud were there; the neighbourhood was pleasanter than he had expected to find it. Hounds within an easy reach, and good country houses as well.

He bore it very well for a time, but when the

hunting season was over, and the neighbouring country houses began to send their occupants up to London, he grew very restless, and vowed he would not stand it much longer. Maud had to protest strongly against the folly of leaving the business which had taken him north unsettled, after having stayed so long, and to urge the necessity it would lay upon him of going back before long, to keep him steady and quiet.

At last, in a wild state of excitement, he wrote and said he was free, and should be on his road south by the time Maud received his letter, though, for the present, he was not coming farther than London. He should see her before long, and now it was over he said he was really almost glad he had been kept away so long, it would hurry some of his arrangements, and help to make the time pass quicker.

Guy in London! alone, with no one to look after him, in the thick of the season. Maud did not like the idea, and was thinking rather anxiously about it, when Mrs. Darryll came in.

"I suppose you have heard from Guy," she said.

"Yes, I've had a long letter this morning."

"It's my belief," continued Mrs. Darryll,

"that his sudden release from captivity has turned his head. One would think he was going to be married within a month by the desperate hurry he is in to get everything settled. I have had such an incoherent letter. Settlements, and I don't know what, mixed up in such inextricable confusion, that it was some time before I could succeed in disentangling my commission about the diamonds from the heap."

"Settlements! diamonds!" Maud repeated. "What are you talking about, Isabel?"

"Do you mean you don't know? Then, for once, I have been favoured with fuller communications respecting my brother's movements than yourself. I am sure I ought to feel highly honoured."

"I certainly have heard nothing about anything of the kind."

"Well, it seems, then, Guy's plans have been much disarranged by this unexpected delay. He meant to have come here for a time, and then gone up, this month, to London, fully provided with work for lawyers in the shape of settlements, and for jewellers in the shape of the Riverston diamonds, to be reset for your special use. Now he thinks—at least that is what I

gather from his incoherent epistle—that he had better stop in London on his way back and settle the whole business. The settlements, he says, he can easily arrange by a letter to the dean; but the diamonds he does me the honour to commit to my charge."

Maud was silent for a moment. Isabel's words brought a strange feeling over her. The mention of settlements and diamonds seemed to give a sort of tangible reality to the fact of her approaching marriage, which, up to that moment, had seemed more like a distant dream. Her thoughts had been so centred upon Guy that she had had very little time to reflect upon the fact that she was going to be married; but the settlements and the diamonds brought it home, with something almost approaching dread, and a wish to put away the idea again.

"What are you to do about the diamonds?" she asked, at last.

"Why, it seems they are at Riverston. I always thought they were at the banker's in London. I fancy one of Guy's romantic fancies has something to do with that; but at any rate there they are, and he wants me to go and get them out, see that they are all right, and send one of the grooms up with them to London.

He says Parsons has the key of the safe. I want you to go over with me, Maud."

"I had rather not, Isabel."

"Now, Maud, that is too bad. I hate that long drive all alone. Considering that I am working on your behalf, I think the least you can do is to go with me. No one will know anything about it except Parsons."

Maud yielded at last to Isabel's entreaties, and they set off; Sir Guy's commands being urgent, that the diamonds should be sent up without loss of time.

"I really am curious to see these same diamonds," Isabel said, as they drove up the avenue to Riverston Hall.

"Have you never seen them?"

"No. Is it not strange? I believe they are very fine; at least, I remember old Lady Dashwood saying they were the admiration of all London when mamma was married; but Guy always threw me off when I asked any questions about them, and I always fancied they were at the banker's."

Mrs. Parsons started perceptibly when Mrs. Darryll told her errand.

"My lady's diamonds, ma'am?" she said.

"Yes, where are they?"

"They are in their case, in a strong safe Sir Rupert had sunk in the wall, in what was my lady's dressing-room, ma'am."

"Well, bring them down, will you. It is so horribly cold I shall stay here and get warm. The wind is bitter, to-day."

Mrs. Parsons left the room in silence.

"Where are you going, Maud?" Mrs. Darryll asked.

"Never mind. I will be back in a moment," Maud answered, as she left the library.

She was waiting for Mrs. Parsons up stairs, when the old woman came up with the keys, quietly wiping away some tears as she did so. She started as she saw Maud.

"I beg your pardon, Miss Vernon. I didn't know you were here. I hope you won't take it amiss, but I did feel so struck to hear Mrs. Darryll ask about the diamonds in that way."

"Why?" asked Maud.

"Because I've never seen them, or heard anything about them, since that dreadful day. And though you know Miss, how glad I am they should come out again, still it did take me so aback. I daresay it's quite natural Mrs. Darryll should speak in that careless way; but it seemed so strange to me."

She unlocked the safe as she spoke, and drew out the heavy leather jewel case. "There were a lot more things," she said, "but Sir Rupert took them all away, and Mrs. Darryll has them. These are just all the family jewels."

"Let me look at them for a moment, before you take them down," Maud said.

Mrs. Parsons placed the case on the table, and unlocked it with trembling hands; but the sight of the diamonds was too much for her, and her tears flowed afresh.

"Oh, Miss Vernon! Miss Vernon!" she sobbed. "I can't bear to look at them, hardly. My poor dear lady—she had them all on the last time I saw them. She didn't often wear them, but she did that night at the ball; and I came in here to see her when she was dressed. I think I can see her now. She was standing by the toilet table, and she really seemed all in a blaze with the light flashing on the diamonds, but I declare the eyes were brighter than the diamonds. I'd seen a good sight of beauty, Miss Vernon, when I used to be my lady's own maid in London, before she was married; but I never did see anything so beautiful as she looked then, and to think that in a few hours I might almost say——"

She stopped abruptly, overcome by the terrible memory.

"Mrs. Parsons," Maud said, gently, "it was terrible, but it was better so."

Mrs. Parsons started. "Miss Vernon!"

"I know *all*," Maud said, in almost a whisper. "Doctor Marsh has told me."

"And you havn't drawn back?"

"Never for a single instant dreamed of such a thing," was the firm reply; "but I cannot talk about it now. Some day you must tell me a great deal, but not now. We had better go down, or perhaps Mrs. Darryll will come up."

Mrs. Parsons silently followed Maud down stairs to the library, and placed the large case on the table.

"What on earth have you been doing, Maud?" Mrs. Darryll said. "I thought you never were coming back. I should have come to look for you if I hadn't been so cold. Now let's look at these wonderful diamonds," she added, without waiting for an answer.

Mrs. Parsons unlocked the case, and raised the lid. Isabel uttered an exclamation of astonishment.

"They really are magnificent. I had no idea they were so fine. Maud, I quite envy you,

they will look splendid when they are re-set. Diamonds are just the thing for that regal bearing of yours. Let me put this tiara on your head, and see how it looks."

Maud shrank back. "No, no," she said; "I had rather not."

"How old fashioned the setting looks. Well, no wonder I suppose, considering that it is going on for thirty years since they were set. I wonder how on earth Guy could leave them here, instead of having them put safe at his banker's. Why, they must be worth thousands. Suppose the house had been robbed or burnt down. Why did they stay here, Mrs. Parsons?"

"Sir Guy didn't like to have them touched, ma'am."

"Why not?"

"They had never been touched," the old woman said, in a trembling tone, "since the day they were put away, after the last time her ladyship wore them."

"Ah, I thought as much; just like Guy. When did mamma last wear them, Mrs. Parsons? but I daresay you don't remember."

"Indeed I do, ma'am. Her ladyship wore them at the county ball, the night but one before she was killed."

"No, did she? poor mamma, how very sad! Look, Maud, did you ever see anything more beautiful than the play of light over those stones? They really are splendid diamonds."

She held up her arm as she spoke, with one of the bracelets on it; and moved it backwards and forwards, so that the stones might catch the light.

Maud did not answer. She stood silently looking at the diamonds as they lay in their velvet-lined case, and thinking with something very like horror of the possibility that she might ever have to wear them. They seemed like a sort of silent link between the past and the present, and she felt as if she never could put them on. Isabel replaced the bracelet after a few moments, saying

"They seem all right, so there is nothing to do but to send them off."

"When are they to go?" Maud asked.

"To-morrow morning Guy wants them sent up. I suppose there is an outer case for this, Mrs. Parsons?"

"Oh, yes, ma'am. There is a strong leather case goes over it. I'll see them safely put up."

"Wait a moment before you close the case," Maud said.

"I want to put in a note for Sir Guy."

"Directions about the setting?" asked Isabel.

"Yes."

"Well, I declare, Maud, I am glad to hear it, for I really didn't believe you cared one bit about them."

"You were quite mistaken then," Maud answered, as she sat down to write her note. It was not very long, and only consisted of an earnest entreaty that Guy would not have the diamonds set at all for her. She meant their life, she told him, to be very quiet, so there would be no occasion for them; and she would really rather not wear them.

"Let me see what orders you have given," Mrs. Darryll said.

"By no means," replied Maud, quietly placing her note in the case, and turning the key in the lock. "Desire the man to tell Sir Guy there is a note for him inside the case," she said to Mrs. Parsons.

"You are very mysterious," Isabel said.

"You had better order the carriage, I think," was Maud's answer, "if we are to get home in time for dinner."

Mrs. Darryll obeyed in silence. She stood a little in awe of Maud, when she spoke in that

way, and very few words passed as they drove home. Maud's face was always slightly stern, when very grave; but Mrs. Darryll thought she had never seen her look so stern as she did that afternoon.

The Riverston diamonds, Maud's note, and the groom, went safely up in each other's company to London the next morning, and reached Sir Guy Rivers in the course of the day.

"Mrs. Parsons desired me to say there was a note for you, inside the case, Sir Guy."

"Note!" repeated Sir Guy. "Who put it there?"

"I don't know, Sir Guy."

Sir Guy's brow darkened. "Who brought over the orders about the case?" he asked

"Mrs. Darryll came herself, Sir Guy."

"Did she come alone?"

"No, Sir Guy, I believe not. I heard that Miss Vernon was with her."

The cloud cleared off again in a moment. "That is all. You can go," he said.

The man obeyed, and Sir Guy hastily opened the case, and took out the note. He smiled as he read it; but the smile passed away, as he looked at the diamonds, and his face grew very sad as he examined them. "The only things

that havn't changed since then," he muttered; "but how splendid they will look on her." If he had been thinking of any one else, he might perhaps have worded the sentence differently, and said, how splendid she will look in them; but he had in this case spoken the truth unconsciously. Maud would set off the diamonds, not they her.

Before evening the jewels were in a jeweller's hands, with such orders as would certainly constitute the future Lady Rivers as enviable a person, in many eyes, as Lady Clara Vere had been so many years since.

Sir Guy Rivers lingered on in London, telling himself each day that business kept him there; and so it did, certainly. Still it might have been settled soon enough if he had hurried its tardy steps; but though he longed to see Maud again, he found London very attractive, after his long banishment to the north. He had got quite dull, the last few weeks he had been there, but he felt his spirits rising before he had been many hours established, amidst all the bustle of a fashionable West-end hotel, in the season. He thought every friend he had ever known seemed to be in London too, he met them at almost every turning. "If only the dean would bring Maud up for a few

weeks," he said, "it would be perfect;" but that he knew was a vain wish. He knew the dean had not been very well for some time, and that even, supposing he were willing to come up, Maud would not hear of it, for London never suited him at all. Perhaps after all, Guy thought, it was just as well. He should leave all the sooner, and he had a little lingering consciousness the life was a dangerous one for him. Still he put off definitely fixing any day for his departure; and consequently was constantly making fresh engagements, which necessitated his staying another day.

"Hang it! this will never do," he said to himself, glancing over his tablets one morning, and finding his time well filled up for a whole week to come. "I can't stand this racketing about much longer. Confound being so excitable." Then he reflected a little, and finally resolved to go down to his club at once, and write a line to Maud, to say he should be at the deanery by dinner time that day week.

A wise resolution—but alas! for the small causes that sometimes produce great results. As Guy Rivers turned into Piccadilly, he heard a well known voice exclaim,—"Rivers! as I'm a living sinner,"—and found himself face to

face with his cousin Lord Bellingham, a wild, good-hearted young fellow, just come of age.

"Well, upon my word," Lord Bellingham said, "you look more like a civilised Christian than I could have expected. Stand back a step or two, will you, and just let me look at you for a moment."

He put up his glass as he spoke, and looked Sir Guy all over with mock solemnity.

"Humph! Well, really, you're surprisingly presentable, I must allow. Think we may venture to walk down St. James's Street with him, don't you, Vyvian?" he said, turning to his companion; "considering that it's still early, you know."

"You impudent rascal, what do you mean?" asked Sir Guy.

"What I say. Here have you been, for the last year or more, lost to all sense of feeling and decency, burying yourself down in the country, and doing model landlord among the turnips; and yet you are surprised that one takes a look at you before one commits oneself to a nearer acquaintance. I can tell you, if I had known you were coming down here, I should have gone up the next street; for I fully expected to see you with your pockets full of turnip seed, and a

fine specimen of mangel-wurzel in your button-hole."

Sir Guy laughed. "I didn't thrash you near enough when you came up a little shaver to Eton," he said. "You havn't half got your impudence knocked out of you."

"No, but really Rivers, do tell us. Is it *really* all the model landlord, and all that kind of thing, that has kept you buried down at that dull hole all this time?"

"What dull hole?"

"Why, Riverston, to be sure."

"I havn't been there since January."

"Then where the devil have you been all this time?"

Sir Guy told him.

"What on earth took you there?"

"Business. The property has been awfully neglected, and there was no end to be done."

"Well, but you have an agent there. Why don't he look after things?"

"So he does, but there was a great deal to be done I was obliged to do myself."

"Rivers!" exclaimed Lord Bellingham, "I believe you're going to be married, and are putting your house in order before you die; that kind of thing, you know. Some stories did come

wandering up from Riverston, but I didn't believe them."

"That shows you are not quite such a fool as I always thought you, then. I'll let you know, fast enough, when I'm going to be married, don't you be afraid."

"Well, at any rate, I'm precious glad to see you have returned to a sense of the duty you owe society, and emerged from the turnips once more."

"I'm going back to the turnips this day week," Sir Guy replied.

"Nonsense. I declare you shan't. Why, my mother's ball comes off the day after."

"I can't help it," was the reply.

"No, but really, Rivers, it's sheer nonsense. You'll lose sight of every one if you go mooning for ever down in the country in that way. There's no end of fellows have been asking me about you, this season; but if you go on that way, they'll soon let you drop."

Sir Guy hesitated. There was something very pleasant in renewing old acquaintance, as he had been doing lately, and his free bachelor days would soon be over now.

"You'd better stay, Rivers," put in Mr. Vyvian. "It's the best season we've had for

some years, and really, in this changing world, we ought to make the best of our opportunities. Who knows when we may have such another?"

"Come, confess the truth," said Lord Bellingham." You're not bound to go down, in any way."

"No, of course I'm not."

"Well, then, that's settled. You're booked at least for her ladyship's ball; and on that occasion we'll settle our future programme. Good-bye, old fellow. I shall see you everywhere, I know."

They sauntered away, and Guy Rivers turned into his club, half wishing he had kept to his resolution, and determining that he would go directly after Lady Bellingham's ball. It certainly was a very pleasant change, and, after all, it was his last bachelor season; he should never be in any danger again, even if he did do a little more dissipation than was quite good for him. It would help to pass the time, too, and the longer he stayed in London, the more he should have to do when he went down to Riverston, and the faster the summer would slip away.

The days did slip away fast enough in London.

Sir Guy's engagements increased alarmingly. He was quite as popular a man as his father had

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been in his young days. Loving mothers liked to see him bending over their daughters' chairs, or riding beside their carriages in the afternoon. Riverston was a charming place, and Sir Guy had inherited some part of his mother's enormous fortune as well; and then, they didn't know anything about Stowminster deanery.

It was all very charming, though somewhat dangerous, Guy admitted to himself; but, at any rate, he had only made two engagements later than Lady Bellingham's ball, and then go he would; for the Derby came the end of that week, and he would not run the risk of being induced to go there. Then he should be safe for ever. He should never be long away from Maud Vernon, until the day when he could say that he should never be absent from her again.

He was riding one morning, a few days before Lady Bellingham's ball, with Lord Bellingham and Lady Ethel Vere, when suddenly, as a group of riders passed, Lord Bellingham exclaimed—

"By Jove! how well that girl rides, and what a figure she has."

Sir Guy looked in the direction he indicated, and gave a sudden start, almost a shiver. It was Pauline Lisle, riding with her brother and Frank Wellwood. Lady Ethel looked too.

"Oh, that is Miss Lisle," she said.

"Do you know her?" asked her brother.

"Yes, I met her in the country last autumn, and she's staying now with a friend of mamma's. Don't you know her, Guy? They belong to your part of the world, I think."

"Yes, I know her," answered Sir Guy, shortly.

"She's such a pretty girl," Lady Ethel continued. "She'll be at our ball. She's engaged to that man on the grey horse; the other one is her brother."

"How do you know she's engaged to him?" asked Sir Guy.

"You seem much interested on the subject," Lady Ethel answered, with a sly look.

"Not I. Only that I know she flatly denied it a little while since."

"As if that was anything to judge by," said Lady Ethel, with a scornful laugh. "I didn't think you were so unsophisticated, Guy."

"Will you answer my question, Ethel? How did you hear it?"

"Mrs. Deane, with whom she is staying, told mamma so, and said her own family didn't much like it; they thought, with her beauty, she might have done better. Here they come down again."

"Stop and speak to her, Ethel, there's a good child," said her brother. "I want to have a look at her. My word! she is awfully pretty."

Lady Ethel stopped, and Pauline instantly did the same, and returned her greeting with great cordiality. Lady Ethel introduced her brother, and then Pauline's eyes fell upon Sir Guy Rivers.

"Ah, Sir Guy!" she exclaimed, with a pretty little start; "I really did not see who you were at the moment. I had no idea you were in London."

She held out her hand in the most frank, charming way, as she spoke. Her graceful manner was a strong contrast to Sir Guy's uneasy hesitation, as he shook hands with her.

They chatted for a few moments, Pauline quite absorbed in talking to Lady Ethel, and then separated; Lord Bellingham in raptures over Pauline's beauty, grace, and skill in managing her restive horse.

Guy Rivers was silent and abstracted; and when they reached the end of the ride again he left them, with some hasty excuse.

"How sulky he's turned, all of a sudden," Lord Bellingham remarked to his sister. "What on earth can be the matter?"

"Who could account for one of Guy's whims?" answered Lady Ethel, laughing.

"No, but really, Ethel, he turned sulky from the moment we met Miss Lisle, and you said she was engaged. Do you think that can have anything to do with it?"

"I'm sure I don't know. May be, perhaps."

Guy Rivers' equanimity was sorely disturbed by this encounter. The girl seemed to haunt him; and the unexpected sight of her at that moment brought up unpleasant remembrances. He could not get her out of his mind again all day. Engaged, too—to Frank Wellwood—after the way she had spoken that fearful evening. Confused as everything else seemed that had happened that night, everything which related to Pauline stood out with marvellous distinctness. What could have made her accept him after the way she spoke then?

Suddenly he found himself speculating whether it was possible she had heard that he was going to marry Maud Vernon; and then he laughed at his own folly for, even in thought, in any way connecting the two ideas, and resolved to think no more about Pauline.

He did not succeed in keeping his resolution. She came back to his thoughts very often, and

all the next two days he was on the watch, wondering whether he should see her, and saying to himself, that, after all, as she was engaged to that fellow, he was rather glad she was to be at Lady Bellingham's ball. She was such a splendid dancer, and he would not be in any danger there.

"Confound it!" he muttered again, as he was dressing for the ball, and felt how nervous and excited he was, "this will never do." He opened the locket, and looked at Maud's likeness, and resolved he would not go to the ball, and that he would go down to Stowminster the next morning. Then he remembered that Lord Bellingham was to call for him, on his way to his mother's, so he must go; he would never let him off. "At any rate, I'll be off the first thing in the morning," he said, as he finished dressing.

The rooms were pretty full by the time they entered, but he could not see Pauline anywhere. Dance succeeded dance, but still she did not come. Sir Guy would hardly dance at all, and Lady Ethel told her mother she had better leave him to himself, he was in one of his queer humours. At last he did ask Lady Ethel herself to waltz.

"What is the matter with you to-night, Guy?" she said.

"I don't know, Ethel; but I'm in a horribly bad temper, I believe."

"I should think so. You need not tell one that. You look positively volcanic. I am really afraid to dance with you."

"I've had too much of London, I think," he said.

"I thought you liked it," said Lady Ethel.

"So I do, but it doesn't suit me. I shall bolt."

They came to a stand just as he spoke, and he found himself close beside Pauline Lisle.

"How late you are," Lady Ethel said.

"Yes, I am so sorry. We had another engagement, and there was some mistake about the carriage. I thought we should never get here at all."

Pauline went off at the moment, and Guy Rivers watched her all round the room, with an expression which puzzled Lady Ethel.

"What are you thinking of, Guy?" she asked.

He started. "I'm sure I don't know."

"I don't believe that," she replied. "I'm quite sure you were thinking about Miss Lisle."

"As you are so sharp, perhaps you can tell me, then, what I was thinking about her."

"Well, if it was not too absurd an idea, I should have said, judging by your face, that you were afraid of her."

"Pshaw! What nonsense, Ethel!" exclaimed Sir Guy.

"Come along, this waltz will be over directly."

A little while after Sir Guy came up to where Pauline was sitting.

"I hope you are going to give me one dance, Miss Lisle."

"I am afraid," she said, looking up with a smile, "I cannot manage it."

"What, not one?" said Sir Guy, in a slightly piqued tone. He was not in the habit of being so used in London.

"I really fear not."

"Ah! I know why," he said, "you are afraid. I beg your pardon; I ought not to have asked you."

With rather a haughty bow he was turning away, when Pauline stopped him, with the question, "Sir Guy Rivers, what can you mean?"

Every feature of her face expressed unbounded astonishment. Sir Guy paused, and said, after a little hesitation—

"I ought to have remembered the unfortunate

termination of the last waltz I had the pleasure of dancing with you. You will naturally feel disinclined to trust me again."

"How could you think of such a thing for a moment? I will certainly waltz with you. I have not one disengaged, but I will ask Mr. Wellwood to change for this quadrille. I can do that with him. See, I have substituted your name for his."

Frank was not well pleased. "I wish you wouldn't, Pauline. He just looks in a mood to do the same thing again."

"No, he will not. I must do it, dear Frank, after what he said."

Frank stood and watched the waltz. Sir Guy danced quietly enough, and said, as he took Pauline to her seat again—

"Have I regained my character, Miss Lisle?"

"Perfectly," she replied. "I don't think I ever enjoyed a waltz so much."

Sir Guy disappeared from the ball-room immediately, and Pauline saw no more of him until a very late hour, when he came up to her with Captain Lisle. Pauline hardly thought she would have liked to dance with him then.

"I say Pauline," said her brother, "isn't there room at Atherley?"

"What on earth do you mean, Harry?" she asked.

"Why, we have persuaded Sir Guy Rivers to join our party to the Derby, and I want you to go down with me to Atherley the next day for the county races. That's what I mean."

"No, really, Miss Lisle," put in Sir Guy, "you need not answer the question as far as I am concerned. I have no intention of trespassing on Mrs. Lisle's kindness."

"Mamma will be only too pleased to see you, and there will be plenty of room for you, I know, because mamma expects me to return home with Harry, and I am not going back for a fortnight, so that will give an extra room. You had better go."

"Thank you. You are very kind, but I must go home at once." He turned away as he spoke, and Pauline went off to dance again.

"Have you persuaded Sir Guy Rivers to go to Atherley, Harry?" Pauline asked her brother, as they drove home.

"He still says he won't, but I mean him to go. He really is an awfully jolly fellow. I had always set him down for rather a milksop, but upon my word, I don't think he is. I believe

there's right good stuff in him, if it was only brought out. We're going to have a dinner at my club after the Derby, and then I shall see what I can do with him."

Pauline asked no more questions, but resigned herself to quiet contemplation during the rest of the drive.

"I'm afraid I must change all my plans again, Mrs. Deane," she said, the next morning, "and go home with Harry next week."

"Oh, I hope not."

"Yes, indeed. . It seems there is to be rather a large party at Atherley during the race-week; and I am sure mamma will want me."

"But she would surely say if she did."

"Oh no, she wouldn't. You don't know mamma. She is so unselfish. As long as she thinks I am enjoying myself, she would never ask me to come home. That just makes me more determined to go."

"Well, I am very sorry," Mrs. Deane said.

"So am I," replied Pauline, "but I feel I ought to go."

Sir Guy Rivers told himself, when he went home from Lady Bellingham's ball, that he certainly would not go to Atherley on any account. Not that, so far, it would matter, as

Pauline would be away, but still it was much better not. He had had quite enough of dissipation; more than was good for him, he knew; so he would go quietly home, and then he would be able to show Maud that he was really learning a little more self-command, as he had been so well able to stand a fortnight's dissipation in London. A fortnight!—why he had been used to spend the best part of the season in London, until three years ago, when he had gone abroad, and yet he did not think he had felt the effects so much then, as now. Could he be getting worse instead of better? The idea rather startled him, but consoling himself that it would be all right soon, he threw it aside.

Sir Guy started for the Derby on the box of Captain Lisle's drag, still steadily refusing to go with him to Atherley for the county races. But by the time he returned in the evening, he had promised he would go. The whole party dined together, and before dinner was over, he had made up his mind that it would have been great nonsense to refuse. That it was absurd to shut himself out from society in that way, with a good deal more to the same purpose.

When Captain Lisle reached his room that night, to which his progress was by no means quite steady, he pronounced to himself that "Rivers was an awfully jolly fellow, and made of the right kind of stuff, after all."

CHAPTER III.

WRECKED!

SIR GUY stopped to lunch at Lady Bellingham's, on his way to the railway station the next day, and there he stayed laughing and talking until the last moment.

"I really don't think he will catch the train," Lady Bellingham said, as he ran down stairs, "What spirits he is in to-day! I have not seen him so lively for a long time."

"I think he's in a great deal too good spirits," replied Ethel. "I always expect to hear of his having done some outrageous thing, in one of his wild moods."

"Who are these Lisles, Ethel, that he is going to stay with?"

"I do not know anything about them, mamma. I have never seen any of them, except the girl who was here the other night."

"I didn't much like her looks."

"Nor I, mamma."

"One couldn't help having her, however, as she was with Mrs. Deane," said Lady Bellingham, with a sort of sigh of resignation.

"Look sharp!" exclaimed Captain Lisle, as Sir Guy dashed up to the station. "You havn't a moment! I've got your ticket. I thought you weren't coming—here, this carriage."

The train was already in motion as they jumped in; and, in the hurry, Sir Guy stumbled over the dress of a lady, who was the only other occupant of the carriage. He turned to apologise, and found himself speaking to Pauline Lisle.

"Miss Lisle! well, this really is too charming. I hadn't the least idea I was to have the honour of being your travelling companion. Surely you said the other night you were not coming home yet."

"So I did, and so I thought; but I have received an unexpected summons home, so as I cannot endure travelling alone, I determined to go down with Harry."

"You ought really to have sent and let me know, Miss Lisle. What an escape I've had! Just think what my feelings would have been, if I had persisted in my refusal to go to Atherley, and then found what I had lost!"

Even Pauline's eyes dropped beneath the cool stare that accompanied the words. "I daresay you would have contrived to survive it," she said.

"Oh, yes! undoubtedly. Malice and all uncharitableness would have made me do that, because I hate the next heir to Riverston. But still it would have been very dreadful!"

Pauline stole a timid look at him for a moment, and then dropped her eyes again. "How awfully pretty she is!" Sir Guy thought, as he looked at her. "I wonder if she really is engaged to that fellow! I don't half believe it!"

They had the conversation all to themselves during the journey. The previous day had been almost too much for Captain Lisle, and he was, moreover, rather sulky. He wanted to smoke, and could not, because his sister was there.

"I wonder whether she really is engaged to that fellow?" Sir Guy soliloquized again, while he was dressing for dinner. "I declare I think I'll ask her. Not that it is of any consequence to me, but I should like to know. She really is a very jolly girl in her way, I must say. I think I'll ask her. I'm sure she wouldn't take it amiss."

But it was by no means an easy task to find an opportunity of asking Pauline the question. The house was full, and she seemed, Sir Guy thought, studiously to avoid him. The whole of that evening he never could succeed in getting a word with her; whenever he approached, she was sure to move off instantly in the most careless way, in exactly the opposite direction. At last he gave it up, and sat down and simply watched her, moving quietly about. Then at last she did come up, and said a few words to him, but she was gone again in a moment. Sir Guy began to feel a half piqued feeling coming over him. He had begun to indulge in one or two little surmises which were rather flattering to his vanity, and now he began to think he was wrong.

"How do you all go over to the races?" he asked Captain Lisle, as they were smoking their cigars that night.

"Oh, some one way, and some another. My mother goes in the carriage. Most of us ride, my sister always does. I suppose you would rather ride than drive, wouldn't you? I'm going to drive some of the fellows over in my dogcart."

"Yes, I'd much rather ride," answered Sir Guy. "I hate a carriage, at any time."

This would be a capital opportunity to satisfy his curiosity with respect to Pauline; and in high good humour he descended the stairs, the next morning, at the appointed time. The first person he met was Pauline herself, prepared to start; but looking anything but like an equestrian, in her flowing draperies, and bewitching little bonnet.

"Miss Lisle!" he exclaimed, in a tone of evident disappointment; "your brother told me you always rode."

"I always have done, until this year," she said.

"And why don't you now?"

Pauline hesitated. "Well, the fact is, mamma didn't like me to do so. We have such a large party of gentlemen this year, and no ladies going to ride; so mamma said she would rather I went in the carriage with her."

"Are you sure it was only Mrs. Lisle who objected to your riding?" asked Sir Guy.

Pauline looked up in surprise. "Yes, certainly. Who else should? Papa doesn't care a bit what I do."

"Nor any one else?"

"Sir Guy, I don't understand you."

He looked hard at her for a moment, but she did not flinch.

"Upon my word, I believe you don't; but I wish you had been going to ride."

"So do I. I like it so much better."

"It's not too late to change now. Run up and put on your habit, and I'll go and see about your horse, and put it all right with Mrs. Lisle. She'll forgive you, for my sake, I'm sure."

"No, no, I can't do that," Pauline replied. "It's very kind indeed of you to wish it; but I think I had better go with mamma."

She rewarded him with a very grateful smile, and with rather a bad grace Sir Guy yielded the point; but he rode very near the carriage, all the way, though he said very little; and all the day he seemed moody and irritable.

Dinner was too late to give him any chance of seeing her in the evening. In fact, it was an understood thing at Atherley, that on the day of the races the gentlemen did not appear in the drawing-room; even supposing dinner was over early enough to enable them to do so.

Sir Guy drank deeper that night than he had done for years; deeper than he had ever done since his Oxford days. It seemed, for the moment, to quiet the restless feeling that was beginning to come over him. And all this, within a few miles of Stowminster deanery, and in de-

fiance of the warning he had said would last him for his life.

Very few of the party appeared the next morning, but Sir Guy did. He could not sleep, and felt too restless to stay in bed. He lounged off to the billiard-room by himself, after breakfast, and was idly knocking the balls about, when Pauline suddenly entered.

"Oh, Sir Guy!" she said, "I thought it was Harry. Do you know where he is?"

"Not come down yet, I imagine. At least I should think not," Sir Guy replied, laughing.

Pauline looked very grave. "I do so hate the race week. If it wasn't for poor mamma, I would never be at home during the time. It's a charming thing," she added, bitterly, "to belong to a sporting family."

"Come and play a game of billiards," Sir Guy said, as she was turning to leave the room.

"Not I. I don't like billiards," she said.

"Well, but wait a moment," Sir Guy answered. "If you won't play, sit down and talk to me, while I practise. I want to ask you a question."

"Perhaps I shall not choose to answer it."

"Oh yes you will, I'm sure, because you are

so good natured; and I really do want very much to know."

"What is it?" she asked.

"They tell me, up in London, that you really are engaged to that fellow Wellwood, after all. Is it so?"

"Sir Guy," Pauline replied, coldly, "I told you once before, that you had no right to ask me any such question."

"I know I havn't; but I know you are too sensible to take offence about nothing; and I really do want to know. Do tell me the truth."

"Why are you so anxious on the subject?"

"Because of what you said the last time I asked you."

"What did I say?"

"Well, I mean more, what you implied."

"I don't understand what you mean, Sir Guy."

"Why, you said that Wellwood would make such a good husband, and that the woman who married him would be fortunate, and I don't know how much more; and yet you said you wouldn't have him; so there was but one thing one could think."

"What?"

"That you were in love with some one else."

Pauline gave a perceptible start, and turned her head away, as she said in a forced unnatural tone—

"I am not responsible, Sir Guy, for the construction you choose to put on my words. Nor do I see that this at all justifies your asking me any questions on the subject."

"I don't mean to say that it does, only it seemed so strange you should go and accept the fellow directly afterwards. I wish you would tell me."

Pauline stood playing with a billiard ball, for a moment in silence. Then she said—

"I will, if you will answer me a question first."

"What is that?"

"Are you engaged to Miss Vernon?"

Sir Guy gave a violent start—dropped his cue, and stood looking at Pauline. She looked up at him, and their eyes met—

"No, I am not," Sir Guy answered, deliberately.

"No more am I to Mr. Wellwood," said Pauline, quite as calmly; and then she turned and left the room.

Sir Guy sat down and buried his face in his hands. Ten minutes alone, might have saved

him, even then. Pauline did not know what she was doing when she mentioned Maud's name. But the sound of her step had hardly died away before Captain Lisle and several others came in; and Captain Lisle declaring that it was impossible, after such a night as they had had, to play billiards without plenty of brandy and soda-water, proceeded to give his orders accordingly.

They played on till nearly dinner time, and then Harry said they would have another jolly night, as nearly all the party were going the next morning, so he told his mother she need not expect to see them in the drawing-room. Mrs. Lisle remonstrated to no purpose. Boys would be boys, her husband says. He remembered when he would have done just the same himself, and Mrs. Lisle gave in, as she had had to do many a time before.

"I do hate the race week," she said, to her daughter, "more and more every year. It was bad enough of old, but I do think it's worse now, with Harry."

"I've always hated it before, but I don't hate it this year, mamma."

There was a bright sparkle in Pauline's eyes, which said a great deal to her mother, and

almost consoled her for the doings of the race week.

"It's just this sort of thing that brings us such discredit in the county," she said.

"Never mind, mother, it's all right this year. I think it will be worth it."

The party all broke up the next morning, leaving only Sir Guy Rivers, and one or two others, in the house.

"My dear Pauline," her mother said, when they were alone in the drawing-room, "what on earth is the matter with Sir Guy Rivers?"

"Nothing that I know of, mamma, except that I suspect his head is not quite so strong as Harry's and his boon companions."

"Well, I'm sure I don't know, but I declare I felt quite afraid of him at dinner."

"I don't know what you fellows mean to do," Captain Lisle said, soon after they came into the drawing-room, "but I know I mean to go to bed almost directly. What do you say, Rivers?"

"I don't know about going to bed. I don't feel much inclined to sleep."

Even less than he had felt the night before, and for many nights back. The weather was unusually sultry for the time of year. There was thunder in the air, and that always affected

Guy Rivers; but never, he thought, so much as it seemed to do that night. He almost dreaded the thought of going up to his room, and being alone in the stillness of night; and yet, when he did get there, he could not bear the presence of his servant, and dismissed him instantly. Going to bed was out of the question; he would not have been in the dark for worlds, yet certainly could not sleep with a light in the room. He took a book and tried to read, but every sound made him start nervously. He could not feel as if he was alone. If he could only do something; anything, as long as it needed violent exercise; but what could he do, in the middle of the night, as dark as pitch. Suddenly a bat flew in at the open window, and Sir Guy sprang half across the room, in the violent start he gave. To get rid of the intruder gave him occupation for a time, and when he had accomplished that, he went to the window, and looked out. A verandah ran round two sides of the house at Atherley, on to the flat roof of which Sir Guy's window opened. His chase of the bat had increased the feverish heat which had oppressed him before, and he thought a cigar on the verandah would be very pleasant, and might perhaps help to quiet him again. He

drew a chair out of the window and sat down, and began to think about Pauline again, and of his last fortnight in London. All kinds of strange unaccountable thoughts came sweeping across his brain, in wild confusion; when, in a moment, he was brought back to the present, by hearing a window at the other end of the verandah opened. He looked round in that direction, and saw a figure step out, and come towards him. His heart began to beat more wildly, but he did not move. He knew well enough whose that light footfall was. A few steps brought Pauline into the stream of light from Sir Guy's open window, and at the same instant a slight scream told that she had seen him. Sir Guy sprang to his feet with a strange low laugh.

"Ah! this is charming," he said. "I was just wishing for a little excitement; anything to break this cursed stillness, but I never dreamed of anything like this."

"How did you come here, Sir Guy?" Pauline asked.

"Out of my window, to be sure."

"I hadn't the least idea you were sleeping this side of the house, and never noticed the light till I came upon it. I often go round this

way to mamma's dressing-room; but please don't say anything about this, Sir Guy. I am so distressed. How stupid not to tell me."

The explanation seemed to come very readily, as Pauline turned to retrace her steps. But she was not to get off quite so easily, or have it exactly her own way. With all her skill, she did not thoroughly know the man with whom she had to deal. Sir Guy caught her wrist, as she turned, exclaiming,—

"No, by Jove, I'm not going to let you go in such a hurry; don't you believe it." His grasp seemed almost to scorch her wrist.

"Sir Guy Rivers!" Pauline said, "you forget yourself strangely. Let me go directly. I insist upon it."

"Who wouldn't forget himself under the circumstances, I should like to know? I swear I won't let you go. Come here."

His grasp tightened on her wrist, as she strove to free herself.

"It's no use to struggle, pretty bird," he said. "Though you have bewitched me, you little sorceress, at any rate I'm stronger than you, and come you shall."

He drew her into the room as he spoke, and then still holding her wrist, stood contemplating

her. He might well look. With all her faultless taste in dress, he had never seen her look so lovely as she did then. She had taken off her dress, and her richly embroidered petticoat was quite short enough to show the beautifully shaped ancle, and tiny foot in its delicate slipper. A scarlet dressing-jacket, worked with gold, was carelessly thrown round her shoulders; and, in her momentary struggle with Sir Guy, had fallen off one shoulder, enough to show its faultless proportions, and the white skin, looking even whiter against the vivid scarlet. Her long hair was unfastened, and was sweeping down in a shower, almost to her knees, while the rich glow of colour on her face, ordinarily perhaps a trifle too pale, heightened the brilliancy of her eyes. Sir Guy drew a deep breath, almost a sob—

"You certainly are a lovely creature," he said, in a low hoarse tone.

Pauline had stood motionless for a moment, seeming bewildered; but as he spoke she renewed her struggles to get free.

"Sir Guy Rivers! how dare you treat me in this way? Let me go."

"Not yet awhile; this is really too good a chance. You need not be frightened. No one

will ever know you were here, though it is highly improper, certainly. But then, you see, that's just the charm of it."

"Let me go this instant," she repeated, with flashing eyes, "or I will scream for help."

"And let every one know where you are. You'd better think twice about that," he answered, with a laugh.

"Let me go," she repeated, in a tone in which anger was fast giving way to terror.

Sir Guy's only answer was to draw her closer to him, and throw both arms round her. Pauline's lips were parting for a scream, when it was stopped by a burning kiss.

"That's the only way to stop a woman's mouth," he whispered, in her ear; "and as often as you try to scream I'll do it."

"Let me go," she gasped.

"Not for a whole legion of devils," he answered.

His grasp tightened round her, till she could hardly breathe, and he kissed her again and again, without waiting for any signs of a scream. There was no fear. Pauline was almost wild with real, unaffected terror now, and was sobbing bitterly, too paralyzed even to struggle. She felt she had gone too far. She had never

dreamed of this. For a moment longer he held her, and she felt him quiver from head to foot. Then, with another passionate kiss, he released her.

"There! you needn't be so frightened," he said. "Come, don't sob that way; I'm not going to hurt you. By Jove! I believe she's going into hysterics. Pauline, my darling, don't cry that way. There's no harm done. Stop crying, and sit down; I want to talk to you."

"Let me go," she sobbed. "How dare you treat me in this way?"

"As far as daring goes," he answered, "you had better not put me to the test of what I dare do. But do be quiet, there's a dear child. You needn't be in such a fright. No one will ever know you were here. You surely don't think I would be such a scoundrel as to betray you."

"You can't tell who may find it out, and it's cruel and cowardly of you to do this."

"No, it's not. You couldn't expect a fellow to resist such a temptation, you syren."

"Let me go," she still repeated.

"Not till you hear what I have to say;" and again he drew her to his arms, but more gently this time. "Pauline, I love you to distraction."

He felt her start, but she only answered—

"I don't believe it. You only say this to escape the consequences of what you have done."

"By Heaven, I don't. I'm only speaking the truth. I do love you, and I swear you shan't go until you promise you'll be mine."

She did not answer, and he drew her closer to him. "Speak, my darling, say you love me."

"Oh, Guy!"

"Pauline, will you be my wife? You must, you shall," he continued, vehemently. "You daren't refuse, after what has happened. But you do love me, don't you, darling? I'm sure you do, or you'd have had that fellow."

"Oh, Guy, I have loved you so long," she faltered, hiding her face on his heaving chest. "I know I oughtn't to confess it, but I can't help that. I was furious with myself, but it was no use to fight against it; and now—Oh, Guy, I am so happy!"

She did not struggle now, she was quiet enough in his grasp. Then again she felt a strong shudder pass over him; and with another long kiss he relaxed his hold.

"There, go now," he said, "we will talk about it to-morrow. Go at once, like a dear, good child."

Pauline turned to obey, and, as she did so, Mrs. Lisle appeared at the window.

"Pauline!—Sir Guy Rivers!" she exclaimed.

A few hurried, hardly coherent words of explanation followed. Mrs. Lisle looked very grave.

"Go to your room, my child," she said; "I will follow you in a moment."

Pauline disappeared, and then Mrs. Lisle, standing just within the window, turned to Sir Guy, saying—

"It is hardly well for me to be here, Sir Guy Rivers, and I scarcely know what to say. I feel so bewildered. Under any other circumstances what Pauline has said would have caused me the deepest happiness; as it is, I hardly know whether even that frees me from the necessity of summoning my husband and son to turn you out of our house, even at this hour. Can you explain more clearly how it happened that my daughter should have been here?"

Sir Guy was leaning against the chimney-piece, with his arms folded, and a heavy, sullen cloud gathering on his face.

"You can ask her yourself. I'm sure I don't know much about it," he replied. "Only mind,"

he added, "she's not to blame. I don't mean that. She was in an awful fright, and no wonder either."

Mrs. Lisle looked at him with a puzzled look, for a moment, and then said—

"Well, we must discuss this matter in the morning. I must go now. Good night—and take my advice, Sir Guy—go to bed at once and rest. Much goes on in this house at times which is quite against my wishes, and I fear you have been rather the sufferer."

"Good night," Sir Guy replied, sulkily, without moving, or raising his eyes from the ground.

"Pauline! my dear child," exclaimed Mrs. Lisle, as she entered her daughter's room, "how could you do such a thing?"

Pauline looked up with triumph glittering in her eyes, and lighting up every feature of her face.

"I knew I should conquer," she replied. "Let those laugh who win. I should like to see some of those who have sneered when they hear this."

"But, my darling child, it was such a risk to run."

"All's well that ends well, mamma," Pauline replied, lightly. She by no means intended to

enlighten her mother as to how thoroughly she had been mistaken herself in her calculations; though she was still trembling so violently from the effects of terror and excitement, that it was with difficulty she could command herself sufficiently to prevent her mother seeing it.

"Now tell me, my child, all that has passed."

Pauline had not the least intention of doing that. She told Mrs. Lisle enough, however, to make it perfectly clear that Sir Guy Rivers had asked her to be his wife, and that she had accepted him.

"I don't believe he is sober, Pauline," her mother said, gravely; "perhaps in the morning he ——"

"Nonsense, mamma! He is as sober as you are. Why don't you congratulate me? Surely your utmost wishes are fulfilled now?"

"They are, indeed, my dear child," replied her mother, kissing her. "I confess I have sometimes dreamed of this, but always as something too bright to come true. Nothing could have made me happier, but I am so astonished I can hardly realize that it has actually come to pass."

"What brought you out on to the verandah?"

"I had opened my dressing-room window,

because of the heat, and caught the sound of voices. It was most fortunate."

"So it was, mamma." Both mother and daughter were thinking of the same thing, that it was impossible now that Sir Guy could draw back. Pauline had gloried in having triumphed, but she knew she had but triumphed so far. There was much yet to be done.

Mrs. Lisle was silent for a few moments, and then she said, in rather a hesitating tone—

"But Pauline, my love—"

Pauline guessed what was coming, and her face changed suddenly.

"But what?" she asked.

"What are we to do about Frank Wellwood?"

"You must settle that, mamma," she said, sharply, "and without asking me any questions about it."

"But I can't do that, dear."

"You must, you must," she repeated, vehemently. "I won't be asked about it. You can manage it just how you please."

"But, dear child, he will be sure to write to you himself."

"If he does, he will do it in a way which will make it easier for me to answer, you may be sure of that. You *must* settle it, mamma. I

told you I would never make a fool of myself, and I have kept my word. But you must help me as much as you can."

She spoke in a strange, quavering voice, and, for the moment, all the bright triumphant look had died out of her face.

"I will, I will, my darling. You have behaved splendidly. You have shown so much good sense; and, indeed, you have chosen wisely, Pauline. You will have an excellent husband, as well as a splendid home. You will be very, very happy, my child. You would have sadly missed all the luxuries to which you have been accustomed, had you married Frank. I always disliked the idea for that reason; and romance is all very well, but those things have great weight in real life."

"Yes, yes, I know all that. I know I couldn't have done without these things," Pauline replied, impatiently. "But do leave me to go to bed now, I'm tired."

"So I will; but one thing more, my child, before I go. I should wish this engagement made public immediately. I shall write and explain it all to Aunt Wellwood directly, and to-morrow morning I shall see. If I find that I think it safe to leave Sir Guy in your father's

hands, I shall probably go out myself directly after breakfast, and not return till late. But I must be guided by what he says when I tell him."

"Very well. Do as you please. Only let me go to bed now."

Mrs. Lisle retired, resolving that she would certainly write to Frank Wellwood the very first thing in the morning. It should not be put off a moment longer than that.

The moment Pauline was alone, she threw herself down on her bed, and, burying her face in the pillows, cried bitterly. It was not long, however, before she checked her tears ; and after lying quiet for a little, she got up, and, with a very pale face but a firm determined look, she quietly collected all the letters and presents she had received from Frank, and sealing them up in one packet, she directed it to him and then locked it up. Once or twice, as she was doing it, the tears came again, but she resolutely forced them back, and as she turned the key in the lock she gave a deep sigh, almost like a sigh of relief, and then proceeded to undress and go to bed. Not feeling quite so radiantly triumphant, however, as she had done until the moment when her mother's question about Frank had

brought her back to the full remembrance of all her triumph involved.

For long after he was left alone, Sir Guy Rivers continued to stand as he had stood while Mrs. Lisle talked—with his back against the chimney-piece, his arms folded across his chest, and his eyes fixed on the ground. Everything seemed to be whirling round him in wild confusion, and there was a rushing sound in his head, accompanied by a dull, heavy beating, and once and again by a sudden shoot of sharp pain through his temples, which was almost maddening. Every moment the wild uproar increased, and a black cloud seemed to be settling down upon him. He stretched out his arms to seek something to which to cling, and, reeling forward as he did so, fell heavily to the ground, in, for the time, blessed unconsciousness.

How long he lay there he did not know; but at last he began to feel the rushing in his head again, and then, in a little time, consciousness came back, and he rose and staggered to the window. There had been a heavy thunder shower which had cleared the air, and it was cooler now. He leaned his throbbing head against the cold glass, and groaned in utter

hopeless misery. He still felt confused and half-stunned; but nevertheless, one idea stood out distinctly enough now—Maud Vernon was lost to him for ever. Days and weeks of rapidly increasing excitement had culminated in one moment's madness, which had ruined all his hopes. He knew what he had said; he knew what Pauline Lisle had answered, and that he would never be allowed to escape. He knew, too, that his own mad folly had brought this on him. He had been warned, and in spite of the warning he had rushed into danger. As the night air cooled his throbbing head a little, he only seemed to realise his misery more fully and clearly; and black, hopeless despair began to settle down upon him, and a reckless indifference to the future. What mattered it now what became of him? What use even to attempt to free himself from the snare in which he had been so artfully entangled? Supposing he did succeed in getting free, what then? Had he anything to hope from Maud now? Would she ever stoop from her lofty height to accept the love which had been so utterly degraded? Never! There was nothing but ruin before him; he felt self-respect, hope—all that brightens man's life, was gone. He was utterly degraded

in his own eyes already, and would be, ere many hours were over, in the eyes of all for whose opinion he cared. Then, with a feeling almost of loathing and abhorrence, he thought of the beautiful girl he had been clasping in his arms, with such a passionate clasp, but a few hours since; and he smiled a ghastly distorted smile as he did so. What worse punishment could there be for her than to let her link her fate with his? "My wife!" he muttered. "A blessed fate. Yes, she shall be my wife if she likes;" and a bitter curse followed the words.

Suddenly, as he moved restlessly, his hand came against the locket hanging to his watch-guard. He started as if it had stung him, and then walked to the dressing-table. With a white face and unsteady hand he unfastened it from the guard, and, opening it, looked at the likeness. It had often soothed him before, it only maddened him now. What right had Maud's pure face there? With desperate energy he tore the likeness from its case, and held it to the flame of one of the candles till it was but a blistered shrivelled mass, and then a drop on his hand made him start. It was blood—blood from his lip, which he had bitten nearly through, without knowing that he was biting it. He opened

the other side of the locket, gazed for a few moments at the face, and, with a smothered cry of "Mother! mother!" he threw himself down upon the bed, and lay till morning in a half-conscious, half-unconscious state.

CHAPTER IV.

MRS. LISLE IS VERY PROMPT.

No sleep visited Mrs. Lisle's pillow that night. She lay revolving her plans, settling what she should say to Mrs. Wellwood, what to Frank. The former was not very difficult to settle. This would, she supposed, produce a quarrel between the two families, but she could laugh at that now. Her daughter married to the richest and most influential man in the county, what cared she what her aunt might think? But Frank—that was quite another matter, and by no means so easy a one. Cold hearted, worldly woman as she was, she almost shrank from the task before her, and wished Pauline would have written herself. But it must be done, so there was no use in thinking about it. Then she wondered how Mr. Lisle would regard her views, and wished, though she hardly dared to hope, he would

receive the information in such a manner as would make her feel she should be safe in leaving Sir Guy in his hands, which was what she was most anxious to do. She was up almost before it was light, and soon seated at the writing table in her dressing-room. Note after note was rapidly written, announcing to one, and another, Pauline's approaching marriage to Sir Guy Rivers. Some were stamped for the post; some put aside to be left by herself that day. Then she wrote to Mrs. Wellwood; that was soon done; the letter to Frank took longer, but at last that was finished too, telling him that her worst fears, the very fears which had made her speak as she had done to him the evening he arrived at Atherley—had all been realized, more than realized. That Pauline, a perfect child in everything concerning the heart, had been quite mistaken as to her feelings towards himself. That Sir Guy Rivers' proposal for her had brought this to light. That Pauline had most honourably intended to fulfil her engagement; but that when closely pressed by herself had admitted she had been entirely deceived as to her own feelings, and that she knew now, she loved Sir Guy Rivers dearly. That under these circumstances she and Mr. Lisle had positively

insisted that she should not refuse him, and had, in her name, promised Sir Guy her hand. Pauline was, she said, deeply distressed, and wanted to write herself, but she had prevented her doing so; feeling it would be better no further communication should pass between them. All his letters and presents should be returned directly, and she begged, in conclusion, he would pursue the same course with Pauline's; and wound up with a few commonplace expressions of sympathy with his feelings.

She felt highly satisfied, and considerably relieved, as she signed her firm bold signature to this precious document; and then, finding it was about the time when she thought Mr. Lisle would have nearly finished dressing, she took her way to his dressing-room.

In a few words she told him all that had passed, and Mr. Lisle's reception of the news surpassed even her most sanguine anticipations.

"By Jove, I'm delighted to hear it," he exclaimed. "Well done, little Pauline! you'll send that fellow Wellwood to the right about, of course."

"Of course — that's done already in fact. But don't say anything about it to Pauline. I really do believe she has a little bit of senti-

mental romance about her, and she doesn't like to hear anything said."

"Caught the baronet!" repeated Mr. Lisle. "Well, upon my word, she's a clever little monkey."

"Sir Guy is extremely in love, Charles," said his wife.

"Oh, of course," replied Mr. Lisle, with a laugh. "No doubt of that. But I say, Louisa, how about Miss Vernon?"

"I don't believe there was ever anything of the kind," said Mrs. Lisle; "but at any rate if there was, of course, it must have gone off, or he could not have proposed to Pauline. Certainly we have nothing to do with that."

"Certainly not. Of course it is all right."

"You must see Sir Guy directly after breakfast, Charles, and talk to him about it. You see, though I have no doubt he will make an admirable husband, he is rather a wild young fellow, at present; and —— in short, you know—young men will be young men, and I think the sooner everything is settled the better."

"Most undoubtedly," replied Mr. Lisle, "you may depend I'll tackle him, straight off."

"I want it put well forward at once, for another reason too. You see Pauline is very

young, and she really is a little romantic; and if Frank should turn very desperate, I ——"

"You would like her secured from turning tail, that's about it, I suppose. By Jove, after what you tell me happened last night, she could hardly do that. It's precious lucky the fellow did pop, or I should have been obliged to horse-whip him, I suppose, which would have been confoundedly awkward."

"Well, you will see and settle everything, will you not?"

"Don't you be afraid. I'll nail him hard and fast the moment he appears."

Mrs. Lisle retired and sought her son's dressing-room next. Captain Lisle heard all she had to say, in silence, and then seating himself on the corner of the table, he looked his mother full in the face.

"Humph!" he said. "Sold under cost price to a likely bidder, and then knocked down under his very nose, without his leave or license, to a higher one. I call that downright swindling."

"Harry! how can you speak in such a way?" exclaimed his mother, reddening with anger.

"Highly moral and respectable family, the

Lisles of Atherley Park, I must say. Old gentleman much respected in the county, for his skill on the turf, and various other creditable qualifications. Heir apparent—promising young man—over head and ears in debt already, and cut by a great many men, and by all respectable women, as far as anything like intimate acquaintance goes. And now, young woman of the family, promises to marry as nice a fellow as ever walked this earth; plays the very devil with him, and is found, at the witching hour of midnight, in the bedroom of a rather fast man, whom it appears she has promised to marry. I should certainly advise you, by all means, to promote the marriage, my dear mother. Only I wonder what you mean to say to that poor devil up in London, who really does care for Pauline a deal more than she deserves."

"I have already written to Frank Wellwood," replied Mrs. Lisle, who, angry as she was, thought it prudent to leave the first part of her son's speech unnoticed. She did not care to provoke him, for she knew he could, if he chose, be coarse enough to drive even her from the room. She never felt quite safe, except when Pauline was by; and in her presence she

never heard a word from her son that the most fastidious could have condemned.

"I hope," she added, after a pause, "he will have the good feeling not to give any trouble about it."

"You'd better favour him with particulars, if he does," Harry replied, with a short cough, "and you won't have anything to fear. I'd lay any odds, Wellwood's not the sort of fellow to care much about marrying a girl who has contrived to find her way into a man's bedroom in the middle of the night."

"Harry! how dare you speak in that way of your sister? I have told you how it happened."

"Gammon!" was the answer. "Do you think I'm blind, and havn't seen what's been going on. No, no, I thought better of Lena, but I see she's no better than the rest of the family? She's conquered, and may the Lord have mercy on her, if she marries that fellow, that's all. Now, walk off, please, mother. I don't want to hear anything more about it."

"You won't interfere in any way?"

"Not I. I'll have nothing to do with it. You and Lena may settle your own affairs, and sell her to the devil, before I trouble myself about it."

Mrs. Lisle left the room, without any further remark. Her son's blunt observations had made her very angry, and yet, through it all, she could not help feeling a certain amount of gratitude towards him. Her conscience told her that he might have added some very pointed remarks to his bitter strictures on the family proceedings, gathered from her own early life; but in the midst of all his irony, Captain Lisle had not forgotten that he was speaking to his mother.

When Willis entered his master's room that morning, and saw his master's face, he fairly started, and stood looking at him in silent consternation. Had he seen him unexpectedly, he would have hardly recognized him. He did not express his feelings, however, he knew Sir Guy well enough to know when to be silent.

"What time is it?" asked Sir Guy.

"Half-past eight, Sir Guy."

"Be off, and don't come back till I ring."

"I wonder what's up now?" the man muttered, as he obeyed. "Never been in bed, and such a face! I never saw him look the least like that."

In about half an hour Sir Guy's bell rang, and Willis went back to his room. Sir Guy was sitting by the table, with his head leaning

on his hand, and still in his evening dress. He did not move when Willis entered.

"Won't you change your dress, Sir Guy?" the man said at last.

His master looked up as he spoke, as if then for the first time aware of his servant's presence. The pale haggard face, and the heavy apathy of his manner fairly frightened the man. "I'm afraid you're very ill, Sir Guy," he said. "Shan't I get you something?"

Sir Guy rose without speaking, and attempted to move about, but it was of no use. He sank down on a chair again.

"Get me some brandy," he said.

Willis brought it, and more than one long draught Sir Guy swallowed before he had finished dressing. The sound of wheels drew him to the window, just as he had succeeded in accomplishing the difficult task, and he saw Mrs. Lisle driving down the avenue. A scowl crossed his face—

"Do you know where Mrs. Lisle is off to, so early?"

"No, Sir Guy, I don't. I heard them say she was going out very early, and wouldn't be back till nearly dinner-time; but I don't know where she is gone."

With a dull, heavy tread, very unlike his usual light, active step, Sir Guy descended the stairs. Pauline met him in the hall, with a beaming smile. Guy fairly shuddered as she approached him; never man looked less like an exulting lover. He hardly knew what he was doing, and listened in sullen silence to all Mr. Lisle had to say; assenting to all he proposed, without in the least knowing what it was; until at last he did hear the question—

"When do you wish the marriage to take place?"

"Whenever you like," he said.

"That is rather a strange answer, Sir Guy. It is hardly for us to arrange that. I must say, for my own part, I have a very strong objection to long engagements."

"You'd better have it pretty soon, if you want it to take place at all."

"Sir Guy," said Mr. Lisle, "what do you mean?"

"Simply that I don't believe my life is worth six months' purchase, and it would be a pity your daughter shouldn't secure her jointure, you know."

"Nonsense, my dear fellow," replied Mr. Lisle, adroitly ignoring the latter half of Sir

Guy's speech; "you have only been going a little too fast, and are feeling low from the reaction. You'll be all right in a day or two. Your nerves are evidently rather shaken. I suspect you've been leading a jolly life up in London. A little quiet will set you all straight again. Come and take a ride with me this morning."

"No thank you, I'm going home," answered Sir Guy.

"What, to-day? Nonsense. You mustn't think of such a thing. What will Pauline say?"

"Whatsoever she likes, but I'm going."

And he made good his point. He knew he could not escape his fate, they would take good care of that, nor did he feel much inclined to try; but at any rate he would get away for a little from it all. Some communication must, he knew, pass between him and the deanery; but what, and how? He writhed as he thought of it. That would be a sort of last agony—the closing scene of life for him—the future but a living death.

Pauline vehemently opposed his going, but all in vain. He said he would come back soon, and he intended to do so: but he could not

stay there until he had got over the task which lay before him; and the parting kiss he bestowed upon her was a very different one from those which he had showered upon her the previous night. Pauline was perplexed. She had not expected this, and she did not understand it. But she did not trouble herself much. She felt sure she could hold him, now she had once conquered.

Mrs. Lisle meantime had proceeded on her way towards Stowminster, leaving notes at one house, stopping for a few moments at another; at all, announcing the joyful intelligence, and claiming the congratulations of her friends; prudently blind to the grave looks of some, the evident astonishment of others, until she approached Stowminster, and then she began to feel very nervous. It was a bold step she meditated. No other than a visit to the priory; and feeling convinced, as she did secretly, that Guy Rivers was engaged to Maud Vernon, it was a task that might well make her feel uneasy; but she did not shrink from it for a moment, only she felt her heart beating faster as she approached the priory. She was, however, equal to the situation, and no one who had seen her enter the drawing-room would have supposed

that she was in the least disturbed about anything. To her great satisfaction she found Mr. Darryll there, as well as his wife.

Mrs. Lisle was considering how best to introduce the subject which had brought her there, when Mrs. Darryll asked, rather abruptly—

"Is it true, Mrs. Lisle, that my brother is staying at Atherley?"

This was a splendid opening. Mrs. Lisle plunged boldly into the subject.

"Yes, he has been there for the race week. Is it possible, Mrs. Darryll, that you don't know?"

"Don't know what? If you mean that Guy is there, I certainly did not, or I should not have asked you. He wrote a short time since, from London, saying he should be at Riverston shortly, but he did not say a word about any intention of visiting Atherley, and we have heard nothing from him since. Only I heard a report that he was there.

"No, I didn't mean that, exactly," Mrs. Lisle replied; "but I thought you would surely have known what Sir Guy intended, as I find other people had quite foreseen what was coming, and I was quite prepared to find you expecting some communication from us. But I see Sir Guy has kept his intentions closer than I imagined."

"What on earth do you mean, Mrs. Lisle? We havn't seen Guy for more than three months, you know."

"Ah true; well, I suppose that accounts for it. I had forgotten how much had passed in London. My object in calling to-day was to tell you that Sir Guy has proposed to my daughter, and I am delighted to say has been accepted by her."

The speechless astonishment of her hearers was not lost on Mrs. Lisle, but without giving them time to recover from it she went on—

"I cannot tell you how much happiness the thought of such a marriage, for our dear child, gives both Mr. Lisle and myself. We have always so liked and respected Sir Guy. Had I been asked to choose, I do not know any one to whom I would, with so much pleasure, have committed Pauline's happiness. I know how safe it will be in his hands. I cannot say Sir Guy's proposal was quite unexpected to me. I had detected long ago how much he admired her; and, you know, or perhaps you do not, that they met in London. Pauline told me she saw a great deal of Sir Guy, and when I heard that he intended accompanying her and her brother, on their return to Atherley, I was fully

prepared for what was to happen. I have seen one or two friends this morning on my way, and could not resist claiming their kind congratulations, and I find that I am not the only person who has foreseen this."

With deliberate purpose Mrs. Lisle had talked on, hoping, by giving Mr. and Mrs. Darryll time to think before they were called upon to speak, that any unpleasant revelations might be avoided. "Surely, if they are not surprised into some unguarded expression," she thought, "they won't be such fools as to say anything to me, if there has been any engagement."

Both Edgar Darryll and his wife continued silent when she ceased speaking. The silence was becoming very embarrassing. Mrs. Lisle could hear her heart beating. She sorely doubted Mrs. Darryll's judgment in such a case, and she saw how her colour had deepened while she had been speaking. At last Mrs. Darryll began—

"Really, Mrs. Lisle, I hardly know what to say. It is impossible that Guy can have meant ——"

Mr. Darryll suddenly interrupted her. "Your news has taken us so entirely by surprise, Mrs. Lisle, that we are quite thunderstruck. We

had not the least idea that Rivers meditated any such step."

The quick glance he threw across to his wife, as he spoke, did not escape Mrs. Lisle. Isabel caught it, and remained silent.

"Then certainly Sir Guy has been closer with his own family than he has been with others. But now I have told you my great news, you must forgive me if I leave you. I have a great deal to do, and several very dear friends to whom I am most anxious to impart our great happiness at once."

"You seem in great haste to make it public, Mrs. Lisle."

"Well, the fact is, Mr. Darryll, that Sir Guy is so bent upon the marriage taking place immediately, that we shall have very little time for preparation, I think."

"Is Rivers still at Atherley?"

"Oh dear, yes. Pauline will not be in a hurry to let him go, you may be sure. Dear child, her happiness is quite too deep for words."

This statement, with respect to Guy Rivers, was rather rash on the part of Mrs. Lisle. He was at that moment far away from Atherley.

"I shall probably ride over to-morrow and see him," Mr. Darryll said.

"Ah, do. Come over and dine, and sleep; and you, too, dear Mrs. Darryll, we shall be so charmed. Pauline will want to see more of you than ever now, you know."

"No, thank you," replied Mr. Darryll, "it would not suit either Mrs. Darryll's arrangements or my own. I will ride over in the morning."

"Ah, well, we shall see you all some day, soon, shall we not?" and all smiles and cordiality Mrs. Lisle glided out of the room.

"Edgar! what does it mean?" exclaimed his wife, the moment they were alone.

"God knows, Isabel," he answered, with knitted brows.

"I suspect there has been some devil's work going on. I can't understand it."

"Why did you stop my saying anything?"

"Because it would have been most imprudent to do so, until we know more of what has happened. When did you last see Maud?"

"I have not seen her for nearly a week," sighed Mrs. Darryll. "Maud is still far too dear to me, but she is not what she was. She is much changed within the last few months; either some one is making mischief, or she is so absorbed in her devotion to Guy that she cannot

think of anything else, and I am sure I hardly know which to think it is. But it is a great trial to me."

"Well, well," said Mr. Darryll, impatiently, "never mind about that now; but did she say anything to lead you to suppose there was anything wrong between her and Guy?"

"We never mentioned him at all. My thoughts were so occupied with trying to make her see how different she had become to me to what she used to be, that I never thought of asking about anything else. Do you think it is possible she can have quarrelled with him about anything, Edgar?"

"Think!" he said, "I don't know what to think. At any rate, one thing is clear, and that is, that something must be done. But what, it is not so easy to find out. That woman is spreading the news far and wide, I can see. There's some mischief in it, or she wouldn't be in such a hurry to do that."

"Well, I'm sure I don't know," said his wife, reflectively.

"If all is really fair and right, I am not prepared to say that, in some respects, Pauline is not more suited to Guy than Maud, dearly as I love her."

"Isabel, how can you be such a fool?" exclaimed her husband, angrily, hastily leaving the room, as he spoke. Isabel had often enough to put up with such manifestations of irritability on his part now, nor was her conscience slow to tell her to what she owed them; though it all went down to the score of her peculiarly unhappy fate in being doomed, as it seemed, to spend her life among those who did not understand her. No one ever had understood her, according to her own account, and it certainly seemed very little likely that any one ever would.

In the library Edgar Darryll renewed his perplexing considerations as to what was to be done, and his speculations as to what could have happened. Could Guy Rivers have dared to offer such an outrageous insult to Maud Vernon? The burning indignation he felt at the bare suggestion was hardly, his conscience told him, an entirely fraternal feeling, but he had no time to think of that now. Yet, if there had been any quarrel between them, surely he and Isabel should have heard of it. The more he thought, the more his fear increased, that his excitable, reckless brother-in-law had fallen into some snare artfully laid for him. He had a pretty correct estimate of both Pauline Lisle and her

mother. But what should he do? Should he go to the deanery and tell the dean all he knew? No, it would be worse than useless to do that, until he had more to say; and at last he decided to wait until he had seen Guy the next day, and then decide, when he had more grounds upon which to form a decision.

In a high state of satisfaction Mrs. Lisle continued her course, and having left her carriage at the hotel in Stowminster, that the horses might rest, she proceeded to pay sundry visits in the neighbourhood on foot, and also to transact various pieces of business. Everywhere she went, the information was given that a marriage was shortly to take place between Sir Guy Rivers and Miss Lisle, a fact which certainly rendered the course upon which Edgar Darryll had resolved rather a dangerous one, as it was highly probable the intelligence would find its way to the deanery before he was prepared to carry it there himself. But then he did not know what was going on.

It was late when Mrs. Lisle returned home, very tired, for the last four-and-twenty hours had been most exciting, but thoroughly pleased with her day's work. The news was pretty well spread already, and by the time that

various post-bags were opened the following morning, would be almost universally known throughout the county; and boldly, to herself, Mrs. Lisle said—what she would not openly have said for worlds—"he can't draw back now." Then she had been so wonderfully successful at the priory. It had been a most trying task, and she told herself she had managed admirably in avoiding all unpleasant revelations. It would have been so very awkward if they had persisted in saying anything. She really hardly knew what she should have said. It was so fortunate, too, her finding Mr. Darryll in the drawing-room; but for him, she really believed Mrs. Darryll would have come out with it, she was such a fool. Other people had dropt inuendoes and pointed remarks, and one blunt old lady had positively said—

"But I understood Sir Guy Rivers was engaged to Miss Vernon, though nothing was to be said at present."

"Indeed you are quite mistaken. I have the best authority for saying there never has been the slightest truth in the story," Mrs. Lisle had replied. "I am not in the least surprised it should have got about, however, after the dean taking his daughter to stay at Riverston Hall.

I was astonished when I heard of it. Pauline was asked, but I would not hear of her going. I fancy the dean had some schemes, but I suspect Sir Guy saw through that, and he is the last man to submit to have a wife forced upon him."

"Dear, dear me!" the old lady had rejoined, "what stories people do get up, to be sure."

"Where is Guy?" Mrs. Lisle asked her daughter, when she entered the drawing-room.

"Gone, mamma."

"Gone! my dear child? what do you mean?"

"He is gone to Riverston."

"Why on earth did you let him go?"

"There are limits to human powers," replied Pauline; "and Guy was not in a humour to be crossed this morning. Besides, he said it was positively necessary that he should go over, and that he would return shortly."

"It is very unfortunate," Mrs. Lisle continued, "Mr. Darryll is coming over here to see him to-morrow morning."

"Mamma! do you mean you have been to the priory?" asked Pauline, with some animation."

"Yes."

"What did they say?"

"Very little at all. They both seemed thunderstruck at the news."

Pauline asked no more questions on that point; but proceeded to question her mother as to her other visits, and then, as she was leaving the room to dress for dinner, she suddenly looked back, and asked—

"Mamma, did you write to Mr. Wellwood?"

"Yes, my dear, the letter went to-day."

Without waiting to hear another word, Pauline disappeared.

Mr. Lisle's information was as satisfactory to his wife's feelings as her day's work had been. "He is certainly the sulkiest fellow I ever came across," he said; "but everything is perfectly straightforward. He is prepared to make very handsome settlements, pretty much in fact what I please, and is quite ready to have the marriage whenever we like. But I can't say, Louisa, he seems much in love."

"And who cares about that?" replied Mrs. Lisle. "I'm sick of all those romantic notions, which people always pretend to believe, and invariably ignore utterly, when they come to practice. I have no doubt Sir Guy will make a very good husband; and, in becoming his wife, Pauline will gain what, in my opinion,

is worth a great deal more than any amount of love."

"Was that what you thought when you married, Louisa?" asked her husband.

"It's rather too late in the day for you to ask that question," she answered, bitterly. "At any rate," she added, as she turned to leave the room, "if I had any more romantic ideas then, you may be sure they have all perished long ago."

Early the next morning a note arrived at the priory, for Mr. Darryll, telling him that Sir Guy had gone over, quite unexpectedly, to Riverston the day before. Thither his brother-in-law followed him.

"Is Sir Guy here?" he asked.

"Yes, sir," replied the man; "he came, quite unexpectedly, early this morning."

"This morning!" repeated Mr. Darryll. "Did he not come yesterday?"

"No, sir. Willis came yesterday, and said Sir Guy was coming, but he didn't come himself till this morning."

"How did he come?"

"He walked, sir."

"Where on earth can he have been?" Edgar thought, as he followed the man to the library.

Sir Guy was sitting with his face buried in his hands, and his untasted breakfast still on the table beside him. He did not move as Mr. Darryll entered.

"Guy, my dear fellow, what does all this mean?" he said, laying his hand upon his shoulder as he spoke.

Sir Guy raised his head, and looked at his visitor as if he failed to recognise him.

"Oh, is that you, Darryll?" he said. "What's brought you over here?"

"I've come to look after you, Rivers."

"I'm sure I'm much obliged to you."

"You look frightfully ill. What have you been doing? Come, old fellow, you must rouse yourself, and answer me some questions. Strange rumours are afloat, and something decided must be done at once. Tell me what you have been doing."

With an effort Sir Guy seemed to shake off the heavy stupor which was upon him, and rising from his chair, planted himself on the hearth-rug, and folded his arms. Mr. Darryll started, as the light fell full upon his face.

"Good heavens, Rivers! what is it?"

"What's what? Don't torture me, Darryll. Tell me plainly what you want to know."

"Mrs. Lisle has been over at the priory, and told us you are engaged to her daughter."

"So I am."

"Rivers!" exclaimed Mr. Darryll, "you are not in earnest?"

"Yes I am. She's a lovely creature, ain't she? A man needn't be ashamed of having such a wife to show. I'm not sure a beautiful wife isn't very nearly as satisfactory a possession as a beautiful horse."

Mr. Darryll looked at him in utter amazement.

"When was your engagement to Maud Vernon broken off?" he asked, sternly.

Sir Guy's expression changed, and his face worked violently. He was silent for a moment, and then he said, in a low husky voice,

"It hasn't been broken off——yet—"

"Rivers! are you a scoundrel?"

"The worst unhung, I believe."

"In Heaven's name, do explain what has happened?" said Mr. Darryll, impatiently. "What do you mean to say to Miss Vernon?"

"I don't suppose I ever shall say anything to her, or ever see her sweet face again. I saw it for the last time——"

"When?"

"Last night."

There was evidently something here Edgar did not understand, and he changed his tone, saying more gently—

"Guy, you must tell me what has happened, my dear fellow. It may not be too late to save you yet, if only instant steps are taken."

Guy shook his head. "You don't know. I've been going down the hill some time, but I've got fairly to the bottom of it now."

By degrees, and by dint of many questions, Edgar Darryll drew from him some sort of account of what had passed. All hope died out as he listened; but still he urged his brother-in-law to draw back at once.

Sir Guy shook his head.

"It's no use," was all he would say. Edgar Darryll could draw nothing more from him. As a last resource, he hinted the possibility of a reconciliation being effected between him and Maud. Guy turned upon him in a moment.

"Darryll, can you look me in the face, and say that you believe anything would induce Maud Vernon to become my wife now?"

Edgar Darryll was silent.

"I knew you daren't say that. Then what matters it what I do? There's nothing but ruin

before me—ruin which I have brought on myself—and as for escaping, you don't know those people if you suppose there's any chance of that."

In his secret heart Mr. Darryll believed Guy was right as to the latter part of his assertion; and his whole appearance seemed to promise well for the truth of the former. Edgar Darryll was terribly distressed, for Guy had always been a favourite of his.

"My dear boy," he said, "can nothing be done?"

"Nothing—less than nothing," replied Sir Guy. "I can't escape, I know; and I havn't the heart even to try."

"Then there is nothing for it but for me to communicate with the dean."

Sir Guy nodded without speaking.

"It will break her heart, I believe," Mr. Darryll said almost unconsciously.

Guy turned ashy pale, and trembled violently.

"Tell her,"—he began—

"Tell her what?"

"Nothing!"—and he strode across the room and disappeared, slamming the door after him.

Old Mrs. Parsons stopped Mr. Darryll in the hall—"Oh! what has happened, sir?"

Mr. Darryll told her.

"Oh, my poor young master! There goes the last of the Riverses then, and I thought to live to see the family prospering again. And to think that my dear lady should have brought all this upon them!"

"What on earth do you mean?" asked Mr. Darryll, in a startled tone.

"Oh, I didn't mean anything, sir! My brain's turned with sorrow, and I don't know what I'm saying. My poor, poor young master!"

Very sadly Edgar Darryll mounted his horse and rode home. But though he told himself again and again, that Guy Rivers had acted like a scoundrel, he could not, somehow, bring himself to regard him as one.

CHAPTER V.

THE SWORD DESCENDS.

Edgar Darryll's answers to his wife's eager enquiries, on his return from Riverston, worked a wonderful change in all her sentiments, for the time. Her indignation against both Pauline Lisle and Guy was unbounded. Whatever her own treatment of Maud Vernon might be, she had no idea of any one else failing in duty to her.

"I never heard of anything so utterly disgraceful. How can Guy have dared to bring such a discredit on his family name?"

"He has done that, with a vengeance," replied her husband.

"I declare," Isabel exclaimed, "I shall never like to show my face in the county again."

"You forget that the real state of the case is by no means generally known, Isabel."

"It will all come out, you may depend upon it; and you see it places me in a most awkward position. Maud is known to be my great friend, and at the same time Pauline Lisle is considered my friend also; and it will not be at all clear what part I may have had in the transaction. What an artful designing girl that is. She has just pretended friendship for me in order to serve her own purposes. It is really a most unpleasant position for me, Edgar."

"Don't you think that for the present moment Maud's position is of more consequence?" asked her husband, drily.

"Yes, of course. I had not for a moment forgotten that; but one can't help thinking of things. My dear, dear Maud! Oh, Edgar! how can I tell her what has happened?"

"No one wants you to do so."

"Indeed; but I intend to see her myself. I am the proper person to speak to her about it.

"No, Isabel," replied her husband, firmly; "I cannot allow it. You must excuse me for speaking so authoritatively. I do not often interfere with your wishes in any way; but in this case you must leave the matter in my hands. In the first place, you are a great deal too much

excited, at the present moment, to be fit for so extremely delicate and painful a task; and, in the second, this terrible news must not reach Maud directly from us."

Mrs. Darryll gave way, to the tone rather of her husband's words, than to the words themselves. She had never heard him speak with so much determination before.

"What do you mean to do, then?" she asked.

"To lay the whole case before the dean, and leave him to arrange everything with respect to his daughter, as he judges best."

"Then I shall go to Maud directly afterwards."

"My dear Isabel, is it possible you can be so blind, as not to see that you can do no such thing?" said Edgar, rather impatiently.

"Why not?"

"You forget that it is your brother who has offered to Miss Vernon, I really think, the most atrocious insult that ever was offered to any girl; and that after that, it is quite impossible that you should intrude, until you see in what manner she and the dean may be disposed to treat the whole family."

"You don't mean that you think they would visit their anger on me?"

"I don't think anything about it. I merely say what you must do; but I really must go down to the deanery, for I fear rumours may reach them. I wish to Heaven the interview was over. I wonder if ever in this world any man had such a task laid upon him?"

"I'll never see that girl again, or Guy either!" exclaimed Mrs. Darryll. "My dear, dear Maud! Come back as soon as possible, Edgar, and let me know what has happened. To think of her daring to make a tool of me in that way!"

There were very few things Edgar Darryll would not willingly have given at that moment, could he but have got rid of the necessity of an interview with the dean; while yet he felt that to delay it a single moment, was only to give additional force to the insult which had been offered to his daughter. If he could have given any possible reason, or assigned any cause, however remote, for Guy's conduct, his task would have been easier. But to have to go to such a man as the dean of Stowminster, and tell him that Sir Guy Rivers had, while engaged to his daughter, and at the very moment of making preparations for his marriage to her in the course of a few months, suddenly, and without the slightest reason, proposed to another girl—

and, in addition, allowed the fact to be made generally known without making the slightest communication to the dean on the subject—was a necessity from which he might well shrink.

"I believe the dean is in, sir; but he is particularly engaged," was the answer to his enquiries.

"I must see him directly. Go and tell him so. My business cannot wait."

The man led the way towards the drawing-room.

"Is Miss Vernon in?" asked Edgar, hesitating.

"No, sir; she is out riding."

Somewhat relieved, he entered the room, and in a few moments—they seemed ages to him—was summoned to the library. Doctor Marsh was with the dean, whose manner, as he rose to receive Edgar Darryll, showed the latter at once that some part of his task was lightened. He had only to explain, as far as explanation was possible, not to inform.

"You have arrived at a most fortunate moment, Mr. Darryll," said the dean, haughtily. "Doctor Marsh has just brought me some most extraordinary and painful intelligence, on which I trust you will be able to throw some light."

"May I ask what Doctor Marsh has told you?"

"That Mrs. Lisle was in Stowminster yesterday, and announced to various people that Sir Guy Rivers had proposed to Miss Lisle, and been accepted by her; and that letters have been received from her this morning, by various friends, containing the same information. Can you explain this, Mr. Darryll? The statement is of course false."

"It is perfectly true," replied Edgar Darryll, in a low tone.

The dean started up with a furious gesture. He was a man as much respected for piety, as for learning; but he was, withal, an English gentleman, and a father, and there was hot blood in his veins. He succeeded, however, in checking the words that were rising, and only said—

"What does the scoundrel mean?"

"You may well use the word, Mr. Dean," said Edgar Darryll; "but what he means no man on earth could tell you. Not even Guy himself, I believe."

"Does he suppose he shall escape unpunished?" asked the dean, through his clenched teeth.

"I do not believe," answered Edgar, "he sup-

poses or cares anything about it. Mr. Dean, I do assure you there is some mystery here which is beyond us all. We heard this for the first time ourselves, yesterday, from Mrs. Lisle. I leave you to imagine, if you can, our bewilderment and dismay. We could only conclude some misunderstanding had arisen between your daughter and Guy, and with that idea I went over to Riverston this morning, and saw him. He sullenly admitted that he was engaged to Miss Lisle, and empowered me to communicate with you; but I could get no definite explanation from him as to what had passed. Only one thing I can say, and that is, that at this moment he worships your daughter, and almost shudders at the name of the girl whom he admits he fully intends to marry. He looks frightfully ill too."

"And do you consider that any excuse for the insult he has offered to my daughter, sir?"

"By no means; but I do believe, if you could see him, as I saw him this morning," replied Edgar sadly, "you would not wish a heavier vengeance to fall on him than has fallen."

"Poor fellow! poor fellow!" said Doctor Marsh, in a low tone.

The dean turned sharply towards him. "You

both seem to me to take a very extraordinary tone in this matter," he said.

"There must be, as Mr. Darryll suggests, something not clearly understood," Doctor Marsh answered. He did not say which *we* do not understand.

"Then I am to understand that Sir Guy Rivers empowered you to communicate this intelligence to me," continued the dean, turning again to Edgar Darryll.

"He did: and only let me add, that nothing but a feeling that it was only due to you that I should communicate it to you as soon as possible, induced me to undertake such a task. How distasteful it has been to me, I think you know me well enough, Mr. Dean, to understand."

"Yes, yes, I fully understand. You have nothing at all to do with this; but I must confess, Mr. Darryll, I don't understand you on one point, and that is the manner in which you speak of Sir Guy Rivers' conduct. You are, I am sure, the last man on earth to defend it."

"The very last," exclaimed Edgar Darryll, vehemently, "more especially where Miss Vernon is concerned."

At another time the dean might have been

startled at the tone; at the moment he did not even notice it.

"Yet," he continued, "it seems to me that you speak as if you only half condemned him. I don't understand it."

"I don't understand it myself, Mr. Dean. I only know that I cannot feel towards Guy the feelings I should have expected to feel under the circumstances. His face of utter wretchedness keeps coming up before me whenever I think of him, making me feel more as if he were an object of pity than indignation. When I think of what a noble, generous, honourable fellow he has always been, I can only say, as I said before, that there is something here which none of us understand. But my mission to you is ended; you will excuse me if I do not prolong this extremely painful visit."

"I must ask you, as you are Sir Guy Rivers' representative it seems," replied the dean, "to be the bearer of my answer to his communication, which is simply this, that in a few days he shall hear from me personally."

He held out his hand as he spoke, and Edgar Darryll said, as he took it—

"I hope this sad affair is not to stand for ever as a barrier between the priory and the deanery.

I cannot tell you how much distress it causes both Mrs. Darryll and myself that anything of the kind should have happened."

"It must not in any way affect you ultimately," replied the dean cordially, touched by the deep feeling in his voice. "For the present I cannot answer. It must not depend on myself. In fact, I do not see how, for the present, it would be possible, even were it desirable, that there should be much communication between the two houses; but you must not allow Mrs. Darryll to suppose my daughter will hold her in any way responsible for her brother's conduct."

"She is deeply distressed, I can assure you, and indignant as well," replied Mr. Darryll; and then he went, with something like a sigh of relief, as the library door closed after him, that it was over, yet even more perplexed than when he came. He had fully expected to hear something at the deanery which might give some clue, however faint, to Guy's extraordinary conduct; but it seemed as mysterious as ever.

"Oh, doctor! what am I to do?" the dean exclaimed, the moment they were alone. "My child, my poor child! It was no idle fancy after all then, the dislike I felt to this engagement from the first. But who could have con-

ceived that fine manly fellow could have been such a scoundrel. What does it all mean?"

"Has Maud said nothing to lead you to think there was anything wrong?"

"Nothing. I am sure she has no idea. Oh, doctor, how am I to tell her this? I feel perfectly bewildered. It is hopelessly mysterious."

"It is not in the least so to me," replied Doctor Marsh, "and I rather doubt whether you will find it so to your daughter."

"What do you mean?"

"Ask Maud that. I think she will prefer to tell you herself. If she does not, I will. Only one thing I will say, Mr. Dean. Deeply as I feel for your distress and indignation, and indescribably painful as the circumstances of this unfortunate business are, I cannot but rejoice in some measure at what has happened; and before night you will do the same. There comes your daughter," he added, as he heard the sound of horse's hoofs on the gravel; "I will go. You had better tell her at once, and believe me you won't find her so entirely unprepared as you fear."

He left the room as he spoke, without giving the dean time to ask any further questions. In a few moments Maud came into the room.

"Wasn't that Doctor Marsh," she asked, whom I saw creeping off through the shrubberies?"

"Yes," replied the dean.

"What was he going off in that way for?"

"I'm afraid he was doing it to avoid meeting you, my child."

"Papa, what is it? What has happened?" Maud asked. The tone of her father's voice was quite enough to tell her something was wrong.

"Maud, my darling child," replied the dean, gently drawing her to him, "do you remember my once asking you, what if Guy could not stand the trial I had imposed, and your answer?"

"Perfectly," she said.

"Can you say the same now?"

Maud grew very white, and her father felt her tremble. She was silent for a moment; then she murmured in an almost inaudible tone. "It has come at last then. I thought it was coming. Oh, Guy! Guy!" And she grasped, almost convulsively, the massive diamond ring on the third finger of her left hand. "Tell me at once, papa," she added in a clearer voice, "what has happened. At once, mind—I cannot bear suspense."

The dean could hardly nerve himself for the task. To have told her merely that Guy was false, or that his conduct had been such that the marriage must be broken off, would have been comparatively easy. But to have to tell her that he was at that moment engaged to Pauline Lisle, was almost more than he had courage to do.

It was some time before Maud seemed fully to understand what he meant. At last it dawned upon her, and with a look of horror she raised her eyes to his face.

"Papa," she said, slowly and distinctly, "do you mean that Guy has proposed to Miss Lisle?"

"Yes."

Maud stood perfectly still for a time, neither moving nor speaking. Then she turned, but as she did so she staggered.

The dean caught her, and attempted to draw her towards a couch. "No, I'm not going to faint," she said quietly; "it was only my riding-habit; I quite forgot I had it on. Let me go now, please, for only half-an-hour, I will come back then and talk to you; but let me have half-an-hour. Wait for me here."

He let her go, and then walked up and down

the room, in deep and bitter thought, awaiting her return. He blamed himself now for not having been more cautious in the first instance, and even for having ever allowed the engagement to take place, and wondered at the same time what Doctor Marsh had meant by saying that he would find Maud not entirely unprepared, an assertion which her first words had seemed to bear out. Again and again he looked at the clock, and thought the half-hour would never pass; but punctual, almost to the moment, Maud reappeared, still in her riding-habit, and with a face that looked as if a storm had swept over her, though she was quiet enough now.

"Now tell me, please, papa," she said, "all that has happened."

The dean told her all he knew, but that was little enough, and so he felt himself.

Maud listened in silence, with her head resting on her hand. "Is that all you know?" she asked.

"All," replied the dean.

"My poor, poor Guy!" was all she said.

The dean was more astonished than ever. Not one vestige of indignation did she show at the insult which had been offered to her. And yet he knew her spirit, when once roused, was

no tame one. What could it mean? At last he told her the question Doctor Marsh had bade him ask her. Maud rose as he spoke, and kneeling down beside his chair, she said—

"Yes, papa, it is time you knew all, and why you have not known sooner. Doctor Marsh is quite right. I was in part prepared for this. The one great blow fell months ago, and I have been, in some measure, prepared for anything since then, and more so of late."

Then, still struggling beside him, she told him all that Doctor Marsh had told her. With strangely mingled feelings the dean listened, but, above all, with a strong inclination to clasp his daughter in his arms, as one rescued from some terrible fate, and with a feeling of thankfulness that he had not added needlessly to her pain by using any harsh terms towards Guy. How could she have had the strength to bear all this so firmly and quietly, never giving way for a moment? Her father looked at her with something like awe as she told him all so simply, and then he noticed for the first time, as she knelt there, that many silver threads were visible in her dark hair. And she was but four-and-twenty.

"Why did you not tell me of this, my child?"

"I would not for the world you should have known it, had things happened otherwise, papa. It could but have caused you needless trouble; but now you see how it is that I am somewhat prepared. The sword has been hanging over me for months, it has but descended now. If this had come quite without warning, I don't think I could have borne it."

"How have you borne this all this time?"

"I don't know. It has been very hard sometimes, and you will have to bear with me now if I do give way a little. It will be very hard; anything but this would have been easier to bear, I think. Poor Guy! what a fatal marriage!"

"It will never take place, Maud."

"I am not sure, papa. At any rate, it is nothing to me now. But it will be very hard to see him what he will become."

She leaned her head down on the arm of the chair as she spoke, with a half-choked sob.

"You must not see it. This must be your home for the present no longer."

Maud sprang up with flashing eyes—"And let Miss Lisle sneer and say I could not bear to see her triumph? No, papa! Here I stay until after the marriage takes place. No one

shall say I was so weak as that. After that I don't care."

She was looking at the subject from the opposite side now, and there was no want of spirit, in either face or figure; but it faded rapidly as her thoughts went back again to Guy.

"I have had a half dread for some time that all was not right with him. His letters have made me feel very uneasy. I felt as if his long absence was in some measure weakening my hold upon him; and I am quite sure the life he has been leading in London was the very worst possible for him."

"But how could it have led to this?"

"He has been decoyed down there, you may depend," she said, with something of scorn again, "and advantage taken of some moment of unguarded excitement. Poor, poor Guy! What do the Darrylls say?"

"They are both terribly distressed. Mr. Darryll says Mrs. Darryll is most deeply indignant with both her brother and Miss Lisle."

Maud smiled sadly. "Poor Isabel!" she said. "Papa, you will have to communicate with—with Sir Guy Rivers in some way."

"I am going to write to him."

"You will not speak harshly," she said, in a quivering voice.

"Not now, after what you have told me."

"I shall write too, papa."

"No, no, my child."

"Yes, indeed. You forget, I have much to return."

"Very well, we will talk about it to-morrow," replied her father. "Go now, and lie down till dinner-time." He saw she was getting very nervous, and could not evidently stand much more, and he knew how much solitude would do for her.

The dean walked down to Doctor Marsh's to tell him what had passed. He was terribly anxious about his child. Could she possibly stand the strain?

"Stand it? yes," exclaimed Dr. Marsh. "Let her have her own way in everything, and I will look after her."

"I certainly never knew what was in her till now," said the dean.

"Didn't I tell you no one ever would, until it was brought out by fire? Poor child, it is terrible; but she can stand it, Mr. Dean, though the strain will tell upon her a good deal. I cannot help feeling relieved too. I've tried to

persuade myself all was well, but I never knew how much that marriage was weighing on me till now."

"Nor I," replied the dean. "Much as I liked him, I never liked the idea, but I had persuaded myself all was well. It must have been worse for you."

Doctor Marsh shook his head. "No one knows what it has cost me. Still, at this moment, I do believe, had he married her, all would have been well."

"What will happen now?"

"God only knows."

"Will that marriage ever come off?"

"Not unless they get it done soon. He will probably drink hard now. It is the thing I always feared for him; and that will soon finish him, one way or another."

"And Mrs. Darryll?"

"She is in a most unsatisfactory state of health. Any very violent personal excitement might throw her off at any moment."

"Good heavens!" exclaimed the dean, "what an ill-fated family! What an escape for my child!"

"Ill-fated, certainly, from the day Sir Rupert Rivers brought the tainted blood of the Veres

into it," replied Doctor Marsh. "It will be well if it dies out at once."

The dean sat down the next morning to his painful task of writing to Guy Rivers. What could he say? He had promised Maud he would not write harshly, and yet, as her father, what could he do but write sternly. More than one sheet was torn up, and he was still sitting with the letter but half-written, when he heard a rapid, somewhat unsteady footstep in the hall. Then the door was suddenly opened, and Sir Guy himself stood before him. The dean started. Could that be Guy Rivers? Yes, it was, and he felt his daughter was bitterly avenged. Still he spoke sternly as he rose—

"You are the last person I expected to see in my house, Sir Guy Rivers. I regret that I cannot even offer you the civility of asking you to sit down."

Nevertheless Sir Guy dropped heavily into a chair, as he said, in a hoarse voice—

"I know it looks like an insult, my coming, but I didn't mean it as such. I couldn't help coming to tell you."

"Not to attempt to justify yourself, I hope?"

"Justify myself! You don't know, Mr. Dean.

I daresay you've said some sharp things of me, and called me some hard names; but I tell you, if you exhausted all your vocabulary, and heaped on me every foul name that ever was applied to man, you couldn't do more than I have done myself. No, what I wanted to say to you was only this—I didn't mean it."

"Didn't mean what?"

"Didn't mean to do what I have done. I know I'm a villain, but I'm not a cold-blooded, deliberate one. I don't know myself how it happened. I only know that I was mad, and the devil got hold of me. But don't think, and don't let her think, I did it deliberately."

"Is this really true, Sir Guy Rivers?"

"True, Mr. Dean? It's as true as—as—that at this moment I love Miss Vernon more dearly than I ever loved her before."

The dean was strangely moved. There he sat, face to face with the man who had so grossly insulted his daughter, and yet the only feeling that stirred him was deep pity—never had he seen such havoc worked in so short a time. Guy Rivers looked as only a man can look who has lost all hope—all self-respect.

"I am very glad to hear it," he said at length. "I will fairly tell you, Sir Guy, I have heard

much, since your brother-in-law's visit yesterday, which has altered the feelings with which I at first received his communications. But I can only say that I am extremely glad to hear your conduct has not been deliberate. I fear I know only too well to what to attribute it. This is probably the last time I shall ever see you, and I rejoice it should be the occasion of my hearing of even this slight extenuation of your conduct. I only wish there was any hope you might escape the consequences of it."

"Escape," Sir Guy repeated with a laugh, "when a rattlesnake has got hold of you! Very likely! Good-bye, Mr. Dean. I only came to tell you that; and I have to thank you for your forbearance in not ringing for your men to kick me out of the house the moment I entered it. You will tell her—Miss Vernon, will you not?"

"I will."

"And tell her," he added, turning as he reached the door, "to thank God, every day of her life, for the escape she has had. And tell her, too, that I shan't live long, and that when she hears I'm dead, she will know my last thought was of her."

The door closed, and the dean was alone, but with such dimmed eyes, that he could hardly

see to tear up the half-written letter Sir Guy's entrance had interrupted. Every particle of anger was gone now. He could almost have pitied Pauline Lisle for what he saw would be her fate, had he not felt a secret conviction that she would not hesitate to break the tie which was to bind her to Guy Rivers the moment it suited her to do so.

Guy Rivers paused for a moment outside the door of the house, as if irresolute which way to turn, or whether even to go. To leave the deanery for ever seemed the last plunge into utter darkness, and even then he shrank from it. As he glanced uneasily round him, he noticed that the little door leading into the cathedral was open, and a sudden longing came over him to seek a refuge, even from himself, in the perfect stillness of the silent nave. He hastily crossed the lawn, entered, and sitting down on a low bench, leaned his head against one of the pillars, and tried to forget everything, but tried in vain. All the excitement, which had kept him up so long, was utterly gone; and that terrible depression he had felt before, had come back with tenfold force. Everything seemed such confusion, too. The mere effort to think made him feel giddy. He had not sat there

very long, before a light footstep sounded across the pavement, but he was too much preoccupied to hear it, until a hand was laid on his shoulder, and he heard his name—

"Guy!"

No need for him to look up to answer. The shiver he gave told that he knew well enough who was there. He raised his head slowly. Maud was standing beside him, very pale, but very calm, and looking down upon him with a wonderful depth of gentle sadness in her eyes. He looked up at her for a moment, and to her dying day—even when brighter memories were hers—Maud never forgot the unutterable wretchedness, the hopeless despair, of his face then. It was almost more than she could bear; but with a desperate effort she maintained her calmness. Guy rested his forehead again against the pillar, as if he could not bear her look, and asked hoarsely—

"What have you come here for?"

"To see you once more," she answered.

"How did you know I was here?"

"I saw you go into the cathedral, and I fully meant to see you once again, so I followed you. Oh, Guy, it is worse than all, I think, to see you look as you do now!"

"Why do you speak in that way?" he asked, almost fiercely. "Why don't you spurn me from you with loathing and contempt? By heaven! I could bear it better than to hear you speak in that low, sad tone—it maddens me now! I would rather hear you curse me!"

"I can but speak as I feel," she said; "but I don't want to talk about that. I didn't come here to talk about what it is but useless pain to speak of now, but to implore you to make an effort to save yourself."

"Much use that would be," he replied, bitterly.

"Yes, indeed, it would. It is not too late even now, Guy, if you would only rouse yourself to the effort."

"Do you mean that you care what becomes of me now? If you do, it is a deal more than I do."

"Could I ever cease to care? Had you done what you have done coolly and deliberately, it would have been very different, but I know it was not so. You loved me too well for that."

"Maud, do you still believe I loved you?"

"I have never doubted you for a moment."

"God bless you for that!" he murmured in

a half-choked tone; "I never thought to hear you say that. It will be something, amid all the ruin of my life, to remember that you said that."

"Don't talk of ruin in that way, Guy. Only free yourself from this wretched entanglement, and there may be hope for you yet."

"Maud," he exclaimed, rising suddenly, and standing before her, "I tell you there is none. There has not been a shadow of hope for me since the moment I realised that you were lost to me for ever. It's that that's driving me to ruin, nothing else. I don't think I understand much else; but that one thought seems burning, burning in my brain night and day, and goading me on to madness. I don't care one straw what becomes of me, or how soon I go to the devil. I told you long ago that I was possessed, and I wasn't far wrong."

"Oh, Guy! only don't give way to despair, and you might save yourself yet."

"Maud," he said, almost sternly, "could anything in this world ever give you back to me?"

She was silent. Nothing ever could, she knew; but how tell him so in words?

"I understand your silence," he said, after

a moment's pause; "then don't torture me with talking about hope. I tell you there is none. I havn't even a wish now for anything better than to drown thought and memory as best I may, and end my life as soon as may be."

There was no hope. Maud felt it as she looked at him, now the light fell more strongly on his face. Could she have bade him hope, she doubted whether it would have availed now; and that she could not do, so it was but useless pain to prolong the interview. With a trembling hand, she silently drew from her finger the ring Guy had placed there when first they were engaged, and laid it in his hand. His face grew darker, but he did not speak.

"It was partly to do this, I came," she said in a low tone. "I give it you myself, Guy, as I stand here and call you by that name for the last time, in token that it is given back, not in anger but in deep and bitter sorrow. Remember that harsh and cruel words may be said of you by others, but never even thought by me. The full cause of this, God forbid you should ever know, but so it is. We part in sorrow, not in anger. Take back the ring from

my own hand, in pledge of that, and ——" her voice gave way.

"And what?" asked Guy, dropping back upon the bench again, and burying his face in his hands.

"Some day—when I could have it—let it be sent back to me; and take this as the seal of the perfect truth of all I have said."

She bent forward as she spoke, and gently drawing his hands from his face, kissed his burning forehead; then turned away, and without once looking back, crossed the cathedral, and disappeared. Guy Rivers neither moved nor spoke. He sat and watched her till he could see her no longer, with a hungry despairing look, which it was well Maud did not see. Then, after carefully placing the ring in his waistcoat pocket, he too rose, slowly crossed to another door which opened into the cloisters, and went his way—carefully avoiding the town—to where he had left his horse. He mounted with an effort, and rode slowly home; too utterly crushed for the time even to seek relief in wild excitement.

As Maud entered the house, she met her father. He guessed by her face what had happened.

"You have seen him, my child?" he said.

"Yes, papa. All is over now. We have parted in sorrow, not in bitterness, thank God. The ring that was ——"

The sentence was left unfinished. She broke down entirely, and threw herself into her father's arms, exclaiming in a voice broken by sobs, "Oh papa, if he had only died, I could have borne it better; but to see him as he is, and know what is before him ——"

Giving back the ring had been too much for her. She had known from the moment her father had told her what had happened that she and Guy Rivers were parted for ever. Yet, like many another, she had been better able to bear the fullest inward conviction of the truth than the simple outward action which confirmed the fact; and now she seemed utterly prostrate beneath the blow, which yet, though almost unconsciously to herself, she had been silently nerving herself to bear for some time.

The dean's heart was heavier than it had ever been since the day he stood beside his wife's grave. He felt so powerless, he could do nothing for his child; and at the same time he felt, that dark as the present seemed, it was but too probable that the future might be even

darker. "Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof;" but at the moment the dean could hardly bring himself to rest upon that, and leave the future unto Him who has in infinite mercy veiled it from our eyes.

CHAPTER VI.

PAULINE LISLE FIRES A TRAIN, THE DIRECTION OF WHICH SHE DOES NOT FORESEE.

Pauline Lisle was beginning to feel very uneasy. Several days had passed since Mrs. Lisle had written to Frank Wellwood, and ever since that small parcel, over which her tears had fallen, had been sent up to London, yet they had not heard a word from him. Mrs. Lisle's letter to Mrs. Wellwood had been answered by one expressive of such deep and unqualified indignation at the whole transaction, that Pauline dared not seek any information about Frank from her. Yet until she heard something definite, either from or of him, she could not rest. There was a degree of nervous anxiety about her very unlike her usual tranquil loveliness. The sight of the letter-bag every morning, or any unexpected

sound during the day, made her tremble to an extent she could hardly conceal.

When nearly a week had passed, she began to breathe a little more freely. Surely this silence meant that Frank intended to treat her with utter contempt; and though the idea stung her a little, she admitted to herself that it was certainly better so. Supposing he had taken it into his head to come down and demand an interview, what could *she* have said? She shuddered at the thought of all *he* might have said. Then, too, Guy had promised—not without some pressing, truly—to come back at the end of the week, and the chance of a meeting between the two would have been too awful to contemplate.

The day before Guy was expected, Pauline had been out all the afternoon, when as she approached the lodge she saw one of the grooms waiting for her. He stopped her as she entered, saying—

"My mistress desired me to give you this note, miss, and ask you to read it at once."

Pauline hastily opened her mother's note; it was but a few words written in pencil.

"Leave your horse at the lodge, to be taken to the stables, and come through the garden-door to me, in the breakfast-room."

Pauline was very pale when she entered her mother's presence. "Mamma, what is it?" she said.

"My dear child, I am so distressed; but Mr. Wellwood is here, and insists on seeing you. He declares he will not leave the house until he has heard the truth from your own lips."

Pauline dropped into a chair. "Mamma, I can't see him," she faltered.

"My dear, you must. You must be brave. You have behaved splendidly until now; don't be foolish just at the last. You know what I said to him; you have merely to admit it is all true."

"I *cannot* see him, mamma," she repeated again.

"But you must and shall see him," replied a cold hard voice from behind her, which made both her and her mother start. It came from Frank himself, who had entered the room, unperceived by either, just in time to catch Pauline's last words. Both voice and face were strangely different from anything Pauline had either seen or heard before, when Frank was either looking at or speaking to her. She shuddered, but she did not speak.

"Mrs. Lisle," Frank said coldly, "I must ask you to grant me a few moments' conversa-

tion with Miss Lisle. The interview need not be a long one. Would you be so kind as to leave us alone?"

He stood holding the door open as he spoke. There was something about him which made Mrs. Lisle feel she must obey, and with one whispered word of encouragement to her daughter she left the room, saying as she passed—

"I consider this most ungenerous of you, Mr. Wellwood; and rest assured that I shall take care your interview with my daughter is a very short one."

Frank coldly bowed, without speaking, and closed the door. Then he crossed the room to where Pauline was sitting, and standing before her, said slowly—

"Pauline Lisle, you can be but one of two things; will you tell me which you are? Are you the weak victim of worldly selfish parents, or are you the most lovely piece of base treachery that ever disgraced the name of woman? Say, are you the first, or are you the last?"

She did not answer. She positively cowered, as if in mortal dread of the man she had so cruelly wronged.

"Speak," he said impatiently, "and then I shall know how to act. If you can only say

you are the former, I will save you yet from them and yourself, even if I carry you off by force. But if the latter ——" he stopped.

Still she did not speak. This was worse still. She had been only striving for courage to tell the bold falsehood, and throw the responsibility of her own heartless conduct on others; but now she dare not. She must either be silent, or admit the truth. An answer of some kind, it was evident, he would have.

"It is no use to ask now," she murmured at last.

"Use or no use, I will have an answer," he exclaimed. "Have you, or have you not, acted of your own free will in this black business?"

"I have."

The words were almost gasped out, in a half-choked whisper, and then she hid her guilty face in her hands, as if anticipating the storm which was to follow.

Frank was silent for a moment, and then a torrent of burning words came. Words showing that he saw the whole truth now. Saw that she had falsely coquetted with him all along, and never for a moment intended to be his wife, unless she found Guy Rivers proof against her wiles. Frank Wellwood was not

one of those strong natures which can stand sternly under such a blow; and he had been cruelly wronged and deceived where he had fully loved and trusted. So who shall blame him if, in all the bitterness of this full confirmation of the worst he had feared, he forgot himself entirely—forgot that he was speaking to a woman, and uttered words which even then he was not justified in using. Blame or no blame, so it was; until at last, stung into defiance, Pauline started to her feet, her slight figure drawn to its full height, and her eyes flashing with anger.

"How dare you use such language in my presence? You have deprived yourself of all right to ask me a single question, or even to remain here an instant longer. Leave the room instantly, and the house as well, if you would escape the punishment you so fully merit."

Frank looked at her with a strange expression gathering over his face, and then said, with a cutting sneer—

"You are very particular. I wonder if you looked like that the other night, when Guy Rivers dragged you into his room, and kept you there at the dead of night—against your will—at least as it appeared?"

Every trace of colour fled from Pauline Lisle's face, and she stood speechless. How did he know what had passed? but, knowing it, what use for her to say anything more. Frank stood looking at her in silence, with a mocking smile distorting his face. Then he said—

"Good-bye, Miss Lisle. I had hoped even against hope that our interview might have ended differently. I am quite satisfied, and under the circumstances I can only congratulate you on your brilliant prospects, and strongly advise you to conclude your intended marriage as soon as possible. I'm afraid I can hardly, with sincerity, offer my congratulations to Sir Guy Rivers. But perhaps he is a better judge on that point than I am."

He opened the door as he spoke, strode through the hall, without the slightest notice of Mrs. Lisle, who came out of the drawing-room as he passed, and left the house. In calmer moments afterwards he reproached himself for that interview; but the provocation had been tremendous, greater than even the mere facts of the case could have been. Frank had felt, when he first read Mrs. Lisle's letter, as if the earth was opening under his feet, so fully had he, at least since their engagement, trusted Pauline.

He could not believe it until the parcel that followed brought confirmation of the fact, and then, in the midst of his bewilderment and despair, he met Harry Lisle passing through London on his way back to his regiment. Harry was not devoid of a certain amount of feeling, and he really liked Frank Wellwood ; so, touched by his deep and unfeigned distress, he ventured to administer the wholesome medicine of truth, without stopping to consider whether his patient was in a state to receive it, and told him what had really happened at Atherley, and a little more of the past as well, with a strong recommendation to think no more of Pauline.

His communications had the unexpected effect, though he did not know that, of raising Frank's hopes. Had the truth been a little less startling, it would have served his purpose better, but it was too black. It was impossible, Frank thought, Pauline could be what this account made her. She must be the weak victim of her parents, and he might save her yet. With this idea he went down to Atherley, and was strengthened in it by Mrs. Lisle's evident unwillingness to allow him to see Pauline ; consequently the interview had been a second blow, even more crushing than the first, and in his

hopeless despair he had been too desperate to weigh his words. Afterwards, those few words of Pauline's about remembering what her education had been, and not blaming harshly, would come back to him; and even, in the midst of all his bitterness, he would wish he had been more gentle.

Pauline was still standing where Frank left her, when her mother entered the room.

"Pauline, my dear child," she exclaimed, "how pale you are! What has happened?"

"Nothing has happened, mamma," she answered, after a moment, and with a long, deep-drawn breath, "except that Mr. Wellwood understands now, and is gone."

"Why did he insist on seeing you?" asked Mrs. Lisle.

"I really don't know," she replied. "It was very unnecessary, certainly."

She gathered up her riding habit as she spoke, and, taking her whip and gloves off the table, quietly left the room. Mrs. Lisle asked no more questions. She was quite satisfied that the result of the interview had been all she could wish, though convinced by Pauline's face that it had been by no means so smooth a one as she evidently intended her mother to suppose.

Mrs. Lisle's ideas on the subject, however, fell far short of the truth. Frank's bitter words were stamped with a burning brand on Pauline's memory. She had loved him as far as she was capable of the feeling; and the knowledge that he had entirely fathomed her, and now regarded her with utter contempt, brought with it a sense of shame and humiliation which were almost intolerable, but which had only the effect of hardening her. There was nothing now to hold her back. What there was of good in her was gone with Frank Wellwood. She cared not what her triumph cost her, but triumph she would, and be, in the eyes of the world at least, the envied and admired Lady Rivers. If she found that in time the position did become insupportable, well, what then? She calmly considered the case from that point of view as well, and decided that such ties had been broken before, and might be broken again. And then, with increased bitterness, her thoughts went back to what Frank had said of her.

Yes, triumph she would over those who had sneered at her and her mother; but she soon began to feel that she must by no means rest on her oars as yet. Guy Rivers appeared the next day, and seemed now quite indifferent as to how

long he stayed, or what he did; but it was evident Pauline's courtship was not likely to be a very rosy one. He was everything by turns, and nothing long; everything, that is to say, save what he had been, while Maud's pure influence was over him. At one moment entirely fascinated by Pauline, at another hardly civil to her; and for ever alternating between fits of the wildest excitement, and the most intense depression; constant alone to one thing, and that was to an amount of ardent spirits which made even Mr. Lisle shake his head, and tell Pauline she must contrive to put a stop to that, it would never do. Pauline bore with all his whims and changes with marvellous gentleness and patience, though with just a flash sometimes, which seemed to imply a change might possibly come some day, even in that. The marriage was to take place in about two months.

Pauline had another subject for uneasiness as well, and that was Mrs. Darryll. Neither she nor Mr. Darryll had taken the least notice of the engagement, and Pauline felt considerably perplexed how to act. She would not speak of the subject to Guy. She thought it decidedly one of those to be marked down for careful avoidance with her future husband.

One morning Pauline found a letter for Sir Guy lying on the breakfast-table, the direction of which she recognised as Mrs. Darryll's writing. This rather disturbed her. Guy and his sister were by no means given to much correspondence, she knew, and the letter looked rather voluminous. Pauline was keenly observant of even the least trifles which affected Guy in any way, and she detected, as he read the letter, that its effect on him was by no means soothing, and she was on the alert instantly.

"You have had a letter from Mrs. Darryll, have you not, Guy?" she asked, the moment they were alone.

"Yes," he answered, shortly.

"Does she send me no message?"

"No. Why should she?"

"Surely it would be very natural she should," Pauline answered.

"Humph!" he said; "I suspect if she did, you wouldn't be in a hurry for another."

Pauline wisely asked no more questions, but she watched Guy hastily scrawl a few lines to his sister, with an unsteady hand, and a lowering brow, and when the return post brought another long letter from Mrs. Darryll, she grew very thoughtful.

That very night she sat down and wrote to Mrs. Darryll herself, a short but very artless and affectionate letter, expressive of her fear, from their silence, that Mr. and Mrs. Darryll, for some reason, objected to the intended marriage, and ending with a little pathetic entreaty to Isabel not to cast her off for that, but to teach her to be more worthy of Guy.

She had not to wait long for an answer. Isabel's indignation had not by any means begun to cool, and Pauline's letter was like oil on the flames.

"How dare she write to me?" she exclaimed, throwing the letter across the table to her husband.

"I suspect there are very few things she dare not do," replied Mr. Darryll. "What answer do you mean to send, Isabel?" he added, after reading it.

"None at all, certainly. She has behaved detestably. She knew quite well that Guy was engaged to Maud, and it was most disgraceful to make me a tool in that way, knowing my love for Maud. She has quite come between us; I hardly see Maud now at all, compared to what I did; and it almost breaks my heart to see her face when I do. It does look so sad."

"It's a most confoundedly awkward state of things, certainly," Mr. Darryll said. "I do wish, Isabel, you would consent to go abroad at once, until the marriage is over."

"Why do you wish it so much, Edgar? You are always harping on that."

"I wish it because I cannot bear to be here. People, I daresay, don't say much to you; but they do say most uncommonly unpleasant things to me, sometimes."

"I cannot help it," she answered, in an excited tone. "I will not go until a few days before the marriage. Maud has promised the dean she will go as soon as it is over; but she will not leave Stowminster before, and I don't choose to go until she does. I won't be forced to go, Edgar."

"No one dreamt of forcing you," replied Mr. Darryll.

"Then why do you keep on so about it? I am quite sure you have some other reason for wishing it so much. You have not been a bit like yourself since Maud's marriage was broken off."

Mr. Darryll gave an impatient shrug of his shoulders, and beat a retreat. His patience was often sorely tried now, and he found flight was

the best safeguard, if he wished to avoid a scene.

It would have been well if Mrs. Darryll had adhered to her resolution to leave Pauline Lisle's letter unanswered; but as soon as she was alone, she read it again, and the re-perusal so increased her anger that she suddenly changed her mind, and resolved to answer it in such a style as would put a stop to all future communications from her intended sister-in-law. She sat down accordingly, and, in a hand tremulous from excitement, poured forth, most undisguisedly, all her indignation. She boldly taxed Pauline with having known that Guy Rivers was engaged to Maud Vernon, and with having acted, as she had done, from jealousy of her affection for Maud, and in hopes to produce a quarrel between them. She bitterly reproached her with her perfidious conduct to herself, and ended with sundry hints of the possibility that she might yet find herself foiled, and recommendations not to be too certain of success.

This letter Pauline read thoughtfully, until she came to the suggestion that jealousy of Mrs. Darryll and Maud had actuated her, and then she fairly laughed outright—a thing she very rarely did, more rarely now than ever.

Mrs. Lisle looked up in surprise.

"My dear child! what is the matter?"

Pauline was grave again instantly. "Nothing, mamma," she said, "only Mrs. Darryll is a greater fool even than I took her for."

"Is that letter from her?"

"Yes."

"What does she say?"

"Oh, nothing very particular. It is, as usual, all about herself."

"But does she say nothing about your marriage?"

"Yes. She admits that she wished Guy should marry Miss Vernon, and is disappointed. But it will be all right, mamma, you will see. I'm much mistaken if I can't manage her. I shall go over there early to-morrow."

This announcement so astonished Mrs. Lisle that she made no answer, and Pauline sat thinking, with occasionally a cold hard smile crossing her face, which gave it a cruel expression, added to the gleam of her long-shaped eyes.

The letter left no doubt upon her mind that her own suspicion was correct, that Isabel intended to try and bring about a reconciliation between her brother and Maud Vernon. It was just the very point on which she most wished

to feel certain, as it was the one which she considered the most important for her to guard, and she was greatly pleased at the success of her little scheme for gaining information thereon. A few months ago—even a few weeks ago—she might have shrunk from the step she was resolved upon, but not now. She had grown very cold and hard.

The next morning, at an early hour, she drove up to the priory, and calmly asked for Mrs. Darryll. "Tell her," she said to the footman, as she entered the drawing-room, "that I want particularly to speak to her."

Would she see her?—Pauline debated the question with considerable interest in her own mind, as she sat waiting. The question was soon answered. In a few moments the door opened, and Mrs. Darryll entered; her tall figure drawn up to its full height, and her head thrown slightly back. She came in slowly and quietly, but there was a certain stiffness about her appearance, and when she spoke, a sufficient tremour in her voice to show her calmness was only assumed. It did not for a moment deceive Pauline, who detected instantly that she was trembling with passion.

"I cannot imagine, Miss Lisle," she said, "to

what I am indebted for the honour of a visit from you; but as I understand it is on some very particular business, I have come. I trust you will kindly make the interview as short as possible."

"It is your own letter which has brought me," replied Pauline, in a low half-sad tone.

"Indeed! I must say that was the very last effect I expected, or, you must excuse me if I add, wished it to produce."

"You need not tell me that, Isabel."

"Miss Lisle, I must request you to call me Mrs. Darryll."

"I will, if you still wish it when I have said all I have to say. Your letter was a very cruel one, and I had almost determined to leave you to yourself; but I cannot forget that you are Guy's sister."

"And Maud Vernon's very dearest friend. Did you reflect on that point also, may I ask?"

"I did, indeed, and that was just what brought me. That was what made me write too. I had waited, day after day, for some communication from you; it hardly seemed my place to seek it first; but at last I could stand it no longer, and so I wrote, and your answer confirmed me in my determination to undeceive you, at all risks."

"To undeceive me, Miss Lisle? You are very enigmatical." There was a slight change in her manner already, which was not lost on her visitor.

"Yes, to undeceive you," continued Pauline, in the same low earnest tone. "Now, will you promise me that you will hear all I have to say; and that, even if you feel at first so angry that you are almost inclined to turn me from your house by force, you will still hear me out? If you then still persist in thinking I am wrong, I will promise to leave you, and never seek to see you again. If you think I am right, you will feel very differently towards me to what you do. In either case you will not think of me what you do now."

She spoke slowly, on purpose, to give Isabel time. Her tone and manner were not without their effect either. Mrs. Darryll was evidently a little startled, though she still spoke in a cold haughty tone.

"Having granted you the interview, I think I can hardly refuse what you ask now, though I really cannot conceive why you ask it. But, in the first place, I wish to ask you one question."

"I am quite ready to answer as many as you like to ask. I have nothing to conceal."

"Pray, what account does Guy give of his relations to Miss Vernon?"

"He has never mentioned her name, and I certainly intend to ask no questions on a subject which must be so extremely painful to him." She looked full at Mrs. Darryll as she spoke. Isabel returned the look with one of unfeigned astonishment.

"You look surprised," Pauline continued. "Thinking what you think, I do not wonder that you should. Your letter was the first intimation I had of any engagement between Guy and Miss Vernon. The rumours I had heard upon the subject, I had always regarded as idle gossip. My first impulse was to place your letter, at once, in Guy's hands, demand an explanation, and, should he fail to clear himself, order him instantly to leave my presence for ever." She drew herself up, with flashing eyes as she spoke.

"Did you do so?"

"No, thank heaven! Poor Guy. It must be bad enough, if all is as I think, without that. I don't know how it happened, but suddenly, almost like an inspiration, a suspicion of the truth came to my mind. Then one thing after another seemed to steal up to confirm it; there

is only one thing I want you to tell me. If I am right there, I have no doubt I am right altogether."

"What is that?"

"How long have Guy and Miss Vernon been engaged?"

"Since last October."

"Then why has it been kept so quiet?"

"The dean would not sanction the marriage under a year, and did not wish it talked about, in the mean time."

"Who told you so?"

"Maud."

"And did she tell Guy too?"

"No, the dean told him, but added that Maud was quite willing it should be so. But what on earth can you be asking this for, Miss Lisle? I should have thought you would have hardly wished to discuss this subject with me."

"Isabel," Pauline said, "I believe there is not a woman in England, at this very moment, more cruelly deceived and duped than you are, or a man more so than Guy has been, though I believe he has discovered it. I have no doubt now it is as I thought."

"What do you mean?" Mrs. Darryll asked, in a startled tone.

"I mean that I feel certain, though I have, of course, no direct proof, that Miss Vernon is utterly false to both you and Guy. That she has deceived you cruelly, and never intended, for a moment, to marry Guy."

"How dare you say such a thing?" Mrs. Darryll exclaimed, almost choking with anger. "Leave the house, instantly."

"Remember your promise," Pauline replied.

"I don't remember anything, and don't intend to remember," she almost gasped. "I will not hear another word."

Pauline was really almost frightened at the storm she had raised. Mrs. Darryll seemed to be losing all self-control. She preserved her calm exterior, however, and, rising instantly, replied—

"Well, if it must be so, it must. I have done all I could. This is not the first time I have tried to open your eyes. I am clear from all blame now. If Miss Vernon does succeed in doing you the cruellest injury one woman can do another, I am free from all blame. Good-bye, I cannot feel angry with you. As long as you believe Miss Vernon true to you, you cannot think otherwise than as you do of me. Should the time come that you do me justice, remember

that you will ever find a sister's love and sympathy in me."

She moved toward the door as she spoke, but before she had reached it, Isabel called her back.

"Wait a moment," she said. "You took me so by surprise; it was too much. I will hear; but you have made my heart beat till I am nearly suffocated." She drew a deep gasp, as she spoke.

"My poor Isabel, I am sorry I spoke too hastily. I quite forgot how unprepared you were."

"Tell me now what you mean, and how you have dared to say such a thing of Maud."

"Would to Heaven I might prove to be wrong, but just consider, Isabel."

"Consider what?"

"Consider how strange Miss Vernon's conduct is."

"I don't see it."

"What! not strange that the dean should throw objections in the way of such a marriage?"

"His reasons were good enough. He thought Guy rather inclined to be a little wild."

"Pshaw, Isabel! Had Guy ever shown any dissipated habits since he had known him?"

"No."

"Then why on earth should the dean have made that excuse? No, no, it was Miss Vernon's doing."

"But why?"

"To gain time. She never intended to marry Guy at all. Her affections were given away long before she saw him."

"To whom?"

"*To your husband.*"

Her cruel eyes were watching her victim closely, and she saw her start and shudder, but she did not speak. Without giving her time to recover, Pauline went on—

"I tried long ago to put you on your guard on that point. Many little things since then have made me very uneasy, but I did not like to speak more plainly. I always hoped Mr. Darryll would discover the truth himself, though perhaps it was hardly fair to wish that; but I was certain, if he did, he would act both wisely and rightly, which he could hardly do while unsuspicious of it. Of late I had scarcely thought of it. I had been so engrossed with other thoughts; and when I heard rumours that Guy was engaged to Miss Vernon, I began to think I had been wrong, and that that was the solution of

what I did not understand. But then, when I heard nothing about the engagement from you, I was puzzled, and still more when Guy proposed to me. I did not like to ask him any questions, for fear of making mischief, and I saw too he was unhappy about something. I was dreadfully angry when I first read your letter, and then, in a moment, the truth flashed upon me. Miss Vernon must have accepted Guy only to have a right to a more intimate footing in your house, never intending really to marry him; and he must have found out some part of the truth, at least, and drawn back. How thankful I am I never said anything to him on the subject. Poor Guy! it is no wonder he is a little moody and irritable sometimes. It must be very painful to him to have been caught and duped in that way."

Here she paused. Still Mrs. Darryll did not speak. She was very white, and a baleful light was gleaming in her dark eyes. Pauline began to feel a little frightened.

"Dear Isabel, dear sister, I may call you, may I not? don't look like that, you frighten me. You must not take this so dreadfully to heart. With such a husband as you have, you can laugh at such attempts. It is very cruel, I

know, to find you have been deceived, but remember, we have no proof that I am right. I may be mistaken after all. At any rate, you have a fair opportunity now of drawing back from all intimate acquaintance with Miss Vernon. Why should you not go abroad for a time? Please don't look like that; all will be well yet."

"I wish you would leave me alone," Mrs. Darryll said; "I want to be alone for a little."

"Very well, dear, I will go. I am so grieved to have had to give you so much pain. I feel so much for you."

"Leave me! leave me!" was the impatient answer. And gently kissing her forehead, Pauline glided out of the room. A triumphant smile was on her face, as she lay back in the carriage. "Good," she murmured to herself; "no danger there now. I thought she was horribly jealous."

There was but one danger. Would Isabel take it into her head to question Guy? Pauline thought of that, and for a moment almost wished she had guarded that point more carefully. But a little reflection satisfied her it was better she had said nothing. She did not think Mrs. Darryll very likely to do it; and a certain risk she must be prepared to run.

"How did Mrs. Darryll receive you, Pauline?" Mrs. Lisle asked her daughter in the drawing-room that evening.

"Very kindly, mamma. We had quite a long chat, and I think she is quite satisfied about the marriage now."

"Then there really was no truth in the story that Sir Guy was going to marry Miss Vernon, after all?"

"Not the least. But don't let Guy hear you say a word about it, or even mention her name. He is extremely annoyed at all that has been said. I am quite glad now I never mentioned the subject to him."

"Very well, my dear, and now do look at these patterns of silks, and choose some. You really must begin to get your things ready. Time passes so quickly, you know."

Mother and daughter went into a cabinet council over silk and satin, which lasted until Sir Guy and Mr. Lisle came in. Guy was in one of his excitable moods, and more disposed to play the devoted lover than was usual with him.

"Hulloa!" he exclaimed, lightly. "What's going on?"

"Something in which you have an interest,"

replied Mrs. Lisle. "Come here and choose some dresses for Pauline."

"Oh, let's see," he said, sitting down on a chair just behind Pauline, and resting his chin on her shoulder. "Don't you go and make a hideous fright of my pretty little witch."

He flung the silks carelessly about, laughing and talking merrily. He seemed in such high spirits that Mrs. Lisle thought the opportunity a favourable one for making some enquiries she had been meditating for some time.

"Is it not true, Guy," she asked, "that the Riverston diamonds are magnificent?"

In an instant all Guy's merriment had vanished, and he replied gloomily—

"There are not any."

"Nonsense! You are joking. I have heard people say they have seen your mother wear them."

Guy started up with an audible oath. "I don't care what any one says; I tell you there are none. If Pauline wants diamonds, she had better marry some one else. Not a blessed diamond will she ever see as my wife."

"Guy, how can you say such a thin ? You know I don't care a bit," Pauline said.

"I'm sure I don't know whether you care or

not; I only tell you the fact;" and with the words he hastily left the room.

"What a strange fellow he is!" Mrs. Lisle remarked. "My dear Pauline, I suspect you will have some trouble to manage him."

Pauline's smile in answer had a close affinity to a sneer.

"I don't believe that about the diamonds," Mrs. Lisle continued. "He must have some odd whim about them. I am quite certain there are some splendid family diamonds at Riverston."

"Plenty of time to see to that hereafter, mamma. Will you write about these silks to-morrow?'

The Riverston diamonds were safe enough. They had arrived in all their newly acquired splendour at Riverston, the very day that Guy came over to Atherley, about an hour before he started. He would not even look at them. The same groom who had taken them up to London before was instantly ordered to take them back to the jeweller who had re-set them, with a request that he would give the bearer a formal receipt for them, and keep them until he heard further from Sir Guy Rivers. The diamonds his mother had worn, and which had been re-set with such magnificent additions, under his own

superintendence, for Maud Vernon, should never, he was determined, be worn by the woman who was to be his wife. It did not look well for Pauline Lisle's future prospects, but she was well enough satisfied with her position, and would not have been disposed to quarrel with it even had she known Guy Rivers' determination.

CHAPTER VII.

THE CLOUDS GROW DARKER.

MRS. LISLE's indiscreet question seemed to have had the effect of producing a lasting disturbance of Guy Rivers' serenity. At any rate he brought his visit to Atherley to a sudden termination, and announced the next morning that he was going back to Riverston that very day.

"To-day!" exclaimed Pauline. "Why should you go so soon?"

"Because I choose to go," was Guy's somewhat ungracious answer.

"But why should you go and mope all alone there?"

"No one said I was going to do so. There's plenty of amusement to be had in the neighbourhood of Riverston. I can find plenty of occupation *now*."

Pauline did not quite understand the bitter

stress laid on the last words, and interpreted them very differently from their true meaning.

"I shall make mamma drive me over some day," she said, "that I may see what you are doing, and how the improvements are going on."

"You'll see precious little then, I can tell you," he said. "There's nothing doing at all there now."

"Nothing!" repeated Pauline.

"No. There's nothing been done there for an age. I hate the place, and can't be bored about it. Doing model landlord, and all that kind of thing, is all very well for a time, but I soon got tired of that. Life's much too short for that or any other kind of virtue. Get as much amusement as you can; that's the only thing to do."

"What does Uncle Wellwood say to that?" Pauline asked. "He seemed highly to approve of your fit of virtue."

"I'm sure I don't know. I've never seen him since I've been back in the county."

This answer was highly satisfactory to Pauline, who by no means wished there should be much communication pass, for the present at least, between Riverston hall and the vicarage.

Mrs. Lisle seemed rather pleased than otherwise at Sir Guy's departure. "It is just as well, my dear," she said, "for we really must run up to London for a few days to see about your things. I must say, Pauline, about all that, you have no reason to complain of your father. Very few girls in your position have such a trousseau as yours will be."

"I believe a man is responsible for his wife's debts, contracted before marriage, is he not?" was Pauline's calm rejoinder. After which Mrs. Lisle carefully avoided any further remarks of a like nature.

"It's all very well to say we must go to London, mamma," Pauline continued, finding her mother seemed inclined to leave her bitter speech unanswered; "but I don't mean to go."

"But, my dear child, you must. There is so much to be settled, and the time is really passing so quickly."

"I know that quite well, but I tell you I will not go. You can go up, if you like. You can settle everything without my help. All I need do I can do by writing, perfectly well."

"But I wish you would come," remonstrated Mrs. Lisle.

"I will not, mamma; so there is no use in

bothering about it. In the first place, I don't choose to go to London; and, in the second, I will not leave here again until I do so for good, as Guy Rivers' wife, or —— "

"Or what?"

"Nothing"—"or leave it for ever," she had been on the point of saying, but she checked it. There were moments when, even amid all her brilliant anticipations, some misgivings would rise in her mind with respect to the future. Unprincipled as she was, she had a touch of something like superstition about her, and occasionally fancied she caught a distant echo of the halting step of the lame goddess. It only had the effect of urging her on more determinedly, however.

Mrs. Lisle yielded the point, as she always did when Pauline was determined; and with something of satisfaction too, when it suddenly occurred to her that there might be a possibility of Pauline encountering Frank Wellwood in London. She might have spared herself any misgivings on that point. There was no fear that Frank Wellwood and Pauline Lisle would ever meet again.

A very few days after Sir Guy's departure, Mrs. Darryll appeared, most unexpectedly, at

Atherley. Pauline was alone in the drawing-room. Mrs. Darryll looked hurriedly round, as she entered.

"I am so glad you are alone. I heard Guy was gone. Is Mrs. Lisle at home?"

"Mamma is gone down to the garden, but she will be in soon, or I can send down for her, if you like."

"No, no; don't do that. I want to talk to you for a little. It will just do."

She spoke in hard, sharp, short sentences, strongly indicative of strong excitement, resolutely suppressed; and even Pauline was startled at the expression of her face.

"I am so very, very glad to see you here," Pauline said. "It is the only thing which was wanting to make my happiness complete. I have so often longed for a sister, and now I shall begin to hope I have found one."

"Yes, but, Pauline, I want to speak to you before there is any chance of Mrs. Lisle coming in; about what you told me, you know. Now, remember, I am by no means convinced that you are right. By no means; in fact, I have every hope still that you are wrong. Still I cannot help feeling that, under the circumstances, you are not to blame. You may be mistaken; I

hope and trust you are; but certainly you are not to blame. And, for that reason, I have come."

"I am so very glad," Pauline answered; "and you are not angry with me for telling you what I did."

"Angry! certainly not. You did quite right. It would have been most unfriendly to me not to do so. But still, you know, Pauline —I—what was I going to say? Oh, I know. You see I am not prepared to admit that you are right. My coming here only means that I acquit you of all blame. You must quite understand that. And for the present you must not come to the priory. Do you understand?"

"Perfectly. Of course it would be much better I should not go there; and I suppose you will be going away soon, will you not?"

"I do not know. Perhaps so—perhaps not. I really cannot tell. It will depend on circumstances. I do feel dreadfully ill."

"You don't look well at all. Why not get away at once?"

"No, no; not yet; I must see. I daresay I shall be able to decide before very long."

"Does Mr. Darryll know you have come over here?" Pauline asked.

"No," replied Mrs. Darryll, sharply; "he does not; and mind, Pauline, not a word to any one of what you said to me, not even to Guy."

"Certainly not," said Pauline. "I should not think of saying anything to any one."

"It might ruin all, if you did. I don't believe Guy suspects anything of the kind. I think he must; but I really don't know what I do think. I shall find out, however, I know."

"Then I may call you Isabel now, may I not?" asked Pauline, looking up in Mrs. Darryll's face, with her gentle smile. And a strange contrast the two faces were, at the moment.

"Yes, of course you may. It would be ridiculous for Guy's wife to call me anything else. But don't expect anything like affection from me, Pauline. I mean to harden myself entirely. I never will care for any one again. I will have nothing more to do with wretched summer friends. I will live alone in future, and then I shall not be deceived again. That is to say, if I should find out that you are correct. You must understand that I speak conditionally."

"Oh, yes, dear Isabel. I quite understand that. But you must not say that, even then. You would never have cause to fear my de-

ceiving you. It is just because you are so ready to trust, that you are so easily deceived. You must not try to harden yourself; you must only learn to be a little more cautious."

"No, no. I have done with hollow friendship for ever. The world, and all its pleasures and amusements, shall be my friends in future. I know at least what to expect there. You will see, Pauline, by next season, I shall have my house in London, and be the gayest of the gay. I shall be ready to present you, my dear, when you come back from your wedding-tour. Always speaking conditionally, you know."

"Oh, Isabel! how charming that would be. A season together in London!"

"Yes, wouldn't it be delightful? I don't mean to care a bit about this. I mean to be quite happy, and to lead a most jolly life."

"Here comes mamma," Pauline said.

"Mind, then, Pauline, not a word. Ah, Mrs. Lisle," she said, turning to her, as she entered the room, "I am quite ashamed to see you. I ought to have called long since, but I really couldn't. I can't tell you how astonished I was when I heard that this little witch had carried my impregnable brother by storm. I had really begun to think he was quite matri-

mony-proof. He is such a strange fellow, you know. He never gave me a hint of what was going on. I have just been telling Pauline she must keep him in order. He is a strange being."

She rattled on, hardly leaving Mrs. Lisle time to put in a word, for some time, until at last she contrived to say—

"You know when the marriage is to be?"

"No, indeed. I had forgotten to ask Pauline."

Mrs. Lisle named the day.

"What! so soon?" exclaimed Mrs. Darryll.

"Yes. It does hurry us rather, but Sir Guy would not hear of a longer delay. I shall send you a formal invitation in due time. Of course, we shall see you and Mr. Darryll."

"No, indeed. I fear not."

"Oh, Mrs. Darryll!"

"I am really sorry, but the fact is I have really been quite ill for a long time, though I have kept it all to myself; but no one knows what I have suffered. At last Doctor Marsh noticed how ill I was looking, and insisted on seeing me; and the result is, he has ordered me to go abroad as soon as possible. In fact, we may go any day; certainly before the mar-

riage. I should not wonder if we never come back to the priory at all. I shall be sorry to leave it, for some things; but I am quite conscious it has never suited me."

"We shall see you again before you go."

"No, I think not. We are so uncertain. If we should be likely to remain longer than I think at present, I will let you know. Please don't think of coming over. I should be so sorry if you had the drive for nothing. I will send Pauline a line the moment I am certain. I really must go now," she added, hastily rising. "I have so much to do."

"My dear Pauline! what on earth is the matter with the woman?" Mrs. Lisle said, the moment Mrs. Darryll was gone. "She really looks quite wild."

"She does look queer, certainly," Pauline replied.

"And so dreadfully ill too," Mrs. Lisle continued. "I hardly knew her when I came in. She looks twenty years older than when I last saw her. What can be the matter?"

"She says, mamma, that she thinks she and Mr. Darryll will have a house in London next season."

"What! then she has got tired already of

domestic seclusion and friendship, has she?" Mrs. Lisle said, laughing.

"Apparently," replied Pauline. "I always expected it."

"She will have to get a great deal better than she is now," Mrs. Lisle said, "before she will be fit for a London season. But it would be very nice for you, certainly, my dear."

Another fortnight passed. Mrs. Lisle paid her intended visit to London, and returned again; and then the county sense of propriety received a terrible shock. It was rumoured first, then ascertained to be actually a fact, that Mr., Mrs., and Miss Lisle were gone to stay at Riverston hall. Even those in the neighbourhood, least disposed to make harsh and uncharitable comments, admitted that it was a very strange proceeding; and various remarks began to be made that, if Mrs. Lisle did not take care what she was doing, her daughter would be left to reign in rather lonely splendour at Riverston. There was a strong impression already abroad that there was something not quite right about the whole thing, and this last step was little likely to quiet the active tongues of the neighbourhood. Some of these remarks reached Pauline herself, and were received by

her with her usual cold quiet smile and scornful curl of the lip. She had a very fairly correct estimate of current morality, and a very just appreciation of the powers of gilding, to hide a multitude of sins; and felt, no doubt, that the world in general, and the county in particular, would look with a far more lenient eye upon the backslidings of Lady Rivers, the wife of the wealthiest man in the county, than they did upon those of the comparatively unimportant Miss Lisle. She had, moreover, committed herself to a path in which she could not turn; so there was nothing for it but to go straight on, without looking either to one side or another.

The visit to Riverston was a fact. Pauline had willed that it should take place, and so it did. After Guy left Atherley, she contrived to keep him up to writing tolerably often, by writing constantly herself, upon important nothings, which needed immediate answers; and his letters were very much like himself. She had one from Riverston itself; gloomy, depressed, almost sullen in its tone. The next was from Archerfield; was written in the wildest spirits, and was a most lover-like production. So were one or two more that fol-

lowed from the same place. Then he went back to Riverston, and the next letter was even more unutterably gloomy than the first had been. He complained bitterly of the dulness of the place, and seemed thoroughly wretched. Pauline never liked this frame of mind. She instinctively felt it was a dangerous one for her, so she calmly wrote and told him she should come and pay him a visit, the moment Mrs. Lisle returned from London. Guy acquiesced, neither expressing pleasure nor the reverse. In fact, he almost felt a desperate wish to get rid of some memories connected with Riverston which he knew Pauline's presence would most effectually rout, and he did sometimes feel a sort of fascination, which made him long for her presence; so he wrote and said they had better come, and then almost shuddered at the thought of how near the time was drawing when Pauline, at least, would come for good.

There was one drawback, and that not a slight one, to the arrangement, Pauline felt; and that was, that it would necessitate an interview between Mrs. Wellwood and herself. But that, she philosophically argued, she must face, sooner or later; so the sooner it was got over the better.

Pauline's heart throbbed with a keen sense of triumph as she approached Riverston hall. She had never driven there, straight from Atherley, before; and the road from there passed through the most beautiful part of the property. Every other feeling was lost in exultation as she looked first at the gentle slopes of the park, studded with magnificent trees, stretching far away up to the woods which covered the high grounds behind the house, then at the extensive and beautifully laid-out pleasure grounds immediately surrounding the hall itself; and thought how soon she should reign as mistress there. She drew a vivid picture, as the carriage passed rapidly through the park, of future scenes of splendour and festivity at Riverston. Some business arrangements between her father and Guy Rivers respecting the marriage had brought to light the fact that, for once, rumour had not exaggerated the amount of Sir Guy's wealth. She had no need to fear that any one in the county would be able to vie with her in splendour. But in the midst of her brilliant visions, a sudden turn in the road brought a glimpse of the vicarage before her; and that seemed to bring a cloud over its brightness. Only for a moment how-

ever. She recovered herself as the carriage swept up to the door, and she recollected under what circumstances her next arrival there would take place.

Sir Guy was not forthcoming. He had not expected them so early, the butler said, and had not come in. Pauline bit her lip, and her colour rose a little. She could submit, with the utmost sweetness, in private, to Guy's wayward caprices and alternate fits of excitement and gloom; but she did not like so public a breach of the duties of a happy lover.

"I really almost wish we hadn't come, my dear," her mother whispered, as they ascended the stairs, escorted to their rooms in grave silence by old Mrs. Parsons. "It does seem so very strange."

"Nonsense, mamma; what does it matter?" was Pauline's answer. "I can *afford* to set people's ideas at defiance now. That makes all the difference. It's a simple matter of a certain number of thousands a year; that's all."

Mrs. Lisle partially admitted the truth of this, but still she by no means liked this step. It was such a strange and unusual proceeding. She could only console herself with the reflection that Pauline had, as yet, shown such consum-

mate skill in the management of her own affairs that she supposed, as she willed this visit, it must be right.

Guy shortly appeared, with apologies enough for his unintentional absence to restore Pauline's equanimity, on that point at least. But the sight of him there again seemed to bring before her a view of him as she had last seen him in his own house; and even she could not fail to notice that he was fearfully changed. There was the same tall powerful figure; the same beautifully chiselled features; the same fair curly hair; yet everything was changed, by that nameless change which may not be described—a change which Pauline told herself meant that Guy Rivers was taking rather too jovial a farewell of his bachelor days, but which, any one else would rather have said, spoke of a man going headlong to ruin, without an effort, or even a wish, to turn.

Yet it was not entirely so. There were moments when a gleam of something brighter, in the shape of some sudden memory of the past, would come across Guy Rivers' fevered life, and rouse, at least, remorse and shame, and a momentary wish to change. But then would sweep across his brain the maddening thought that no

change could ever win back for him the happiness he had cast aside with his own hand, and goad him on to seek relief from its sting, and drown thought in reckless excitement.

Mrs. Wellwood knew nothing of this visit. Pauline had resolved she would not give her time to prepare for an interview; so had insisted nothing should be said to her about it. The poor old lady was very unhappy. With all her gentle simplicity she was a clear-headed sensible woman, and though she had not, even now, fathomed the full duplicity of Pauline's conduct, she knew quite enough to make her feel that she had been bitterly deceived in her niece. She felt too, with deep sorrow, how great a share she had herself had in bringing this heavy blow upon her adopted son, and driving him to exile. Frank was far away on his journey to India, with the avowed determination of never again setting foot in England; and though Mrs. Wellwood was too old a woman to place much faith in unalterable determinations, formed under such circumstances, she still felt, that, considering her own and her husband's age, it was very unlikely they should ever see their darling boy again. The parting had been a cruel trial to them. Frank said he could not

come to Riverston; so they had gone to London, for a few days, to see him off, and then returned home, feeling doubly alone. Frank was gone—for ever—and Pauline worse than gone. Her future presence at Riverston would only be a constant reminder to them of their heavy trial.

Mrs. Wellwood was sitting, one morning, thinking as usual over all these things, when the door of the drawing-room opened, and Pauline herself stood before her. Mrs. Wellwood looked at her in astonishment, but at the same time with a very different look from any Pauline had ever received from her before.

"Pauline!" she said, "I did not expect to see you. But how have you come? I did not hear wheels."

"I have walked down from the hall, auntie. Papa, and mamma, and I, are staying there."

"You staying at Riverston hall!" repeated Mrs. Wellwood, almost sternly.

"Yes, auntie."

"A guest in the house of the man who is so shortly to be your husband! I am surprised. I suppose I ought not to be surprised at anything; but I certainly did not expect that."

Her tone slightly stung Pauline, and she an-

swered a little sharply—"You know, Aunt Wellwood, that I never chose to be tied by people's arbitrary rules of propriety, and I am not likely to begin now. Where papa and mamma choose to accompany me, I think I may very safely go."

"We will not discuss the point," replied Mrs. Wellwood. "But what do you expect me to say to you, Pauline?"

"I don't know what to expect, auntie. I know what I wish."

"What?"

"That you will let the past remain unmentioned, and treat me as you used to do."

"When I can forget the past, that may be; but that is never. I could not well find words to tell you what I think of your conduct."

"I could not help it," Pauline replied.

"Not help it!" exclaimed Mrs. Wellwood. "What forced you to act as you have done?"

"Causes which you could never understand," she answered.

"Or which you have not the courage to name. Which is it, Pauline? No, it is useless to say that to me. I know, well enough, what motives have influenced you. I tell you now, unhappy girl, that you did love my poor boy, as

far as you are capable of the feeling; and that you have sacrificed both him and yourself to the reckless thirst for wealth. You have sold yourself for gold, to a man you do not love, and I tell you you will find all your coveted wealth and splendour a weary burden, which will crush your very soul down to perdition, if you do not mind."

Pauline turned pale. "You are very bitter, Aunt Wellwood. If that is all you have to say, I had better go."

"Nay, child, if I spoke bitterly, it was not intentionally. You have bitterly disappointed me, aye, and deceived me too; and you have cruelly wronged and deceived one who is very dear to me. Yet from my very soul I pity you, and can only pray that God may forgive you the wrong you have done, and not visit you with the retribution you so well deserve."

Pauline shuddered, but she did not speak. She had not in the least expected Mrs. Wellwood would take such a tone. Her aunt's constant gentleness had misled her, and encouraged her to expect nothing more than a few mild reproaches. She was not at all prepared for such plain speaking.

"You have but done, I know," Mrs. Wellwood

went on, after a pause, "as many another woman has done before you, and as many another will do again, in the false and hollow world in which you live. Yet I do say, the woman who cruelly trifles with a loving heart is guilty of a great crime. And, to my thinking, the woman who can deliberately give herself to one man, for the sake of his wealth, while her heart is given to another, is little, if any, less degraded than those she would consider it contamination to touch."

"Aunt Wellwood! those are cruel words."

"Cruel, because true, then. Oh, Pauline! even now I would urge you to draw back."

"Never!" exclaimed Pauline, vehemently; "nor have you any right to apply to me, even indirectly, what you have said. Your judgment is founded on your own assumption that I do not love Guy Rivers; and what right have you to judge, or even to reproach me, as you have done? Mr. Wellwood drew his fate on himself, remember. I wanted him to take a refusal, when first he spoke, and he would not. You have no right to visit the result of his determination on me."

"Hush!" replied Mrs. Wellwood, sternly; "it is useless to speak in that way. I can see

deeper into your motives than that. Don't stain your soul with useless falsehoods. I have a message too, for you, from across the seas. A message from Frank."

"From Frank!—across the seas!" repeated Pauline. "What do you mean?"

"I mean that your heartless conduct has driven my poor boy into exile, and that on the deck of the vessel, as we parted for ever, he gave me a message for you. Will you hear it? It hardly agrees with what you have just said."

"What is it?" Pauline asked, shading her face with her hand.

"'Tell her,' he said, 'that though I fully fathom her conduct, from the very first, I do still ask her pardon for one or two expressions I used when we last met—she will know which I mean—and that I freely forgive her, as I hope to be forgiven, for the utter wreck she has made of my life. The time will come, sooner or later, when she will draw comfort from the knowledge of that. And tell her to be a true wife to the man she has won, as she would be forgiven for the wrong she has done to the one she has cast aside.'"

With something very like a sob, Pauline started up, and almost before the last words

were uttered, she was gone. So ended her dreaded interview with her aunt; but if, before she went down to the vicarage that morning, she could have foreseen its tenour, no earthly power would have induced her to face it. As it was, it was days before she could get those words of Frank Wellwood's out of her head, or the constantly recurring thought that he was gone for ever. Now, for the first time, she became conscious herself that she had secretly cherished something very like a hope that she and Frank Wellwood should yet meet again. Whether her thoughts had ever gone further than that, she carefully avoided asking herself.

"My dear Pauline!" her mother exclaimed, the next morning, on returning herself from a visit to the vicarage, "what did Aunt Wellwood say to you about your marriage?"

"She is rather bitter about it, mamma."

"Bitter! I should think so. I had no idea she could be so bitter. I have had to listen to such a tirade, for the last hour, as almost took my breath away. Such utter nonsense too, as if this was the age for romance and sentiment!"

If it had been utter nonsense, it seemed at least to have been very stinging nonsense, to judge from Mrs. Lisle's tone and manner. She

had in truth been rather severely handled. Mrs. Wellwood felt almost more indignant with her than with Pauline, and had spoken the truth to her in a way Mrs. Lisle had not heard it spoken for years.

"Aunt Wellwood believes in love, mamma."

"I know she does; but she forgets people can't live on love. She gave me a message for you, though."

"What?"

"That she wished the past never to be alluded to between you again, now you had once heard her opinion, as it was no use, and could only cause you both needless pain."

"That's a comfort, at any rate," Pauline said, in a tone of relief; and so she felt it.

The visit to Riverston could not in conscience be a long one, though Pauline dreaded losing sight of Guy. Still it was not much more than a month now to the marriage, and that visit was, as she had fully intended it should be, another link in the chain that bound him. It could not but appear that Sir Guy must have been very importunate before Mr. and Mrs. Lisle could have consented to such an unusual step as taking Pauline to stay in his house, under the circumstances.

Guy announced his intention of going to London directly they left. Pauline hardly knew whether to oppose or approve; but his humour, for the moment, was such that she did not think it much consequence which she did, so she acquiesced quietly.

"Surely you will find London rather dull now," she said.

"Oh no. The season is late this year; there are lots of people left; besides, there's always amusement of a certain kind to be had in London. At any rate, there's plenty of life and motion. I'd rather go and stand in the City and watch a crush than stay here where everything is so quiet."

They were all to leave the same day; Guy very early in the morning, the Lisles a little later. The night before, as Pauline was following her mother from the drawing-room, Guy quietly passed his arm round her and drew her back.

"I shan't see you in the morning, little darling," he said, playfully; "I'm going to wish you good-bye now. I say, Pauline, I shan't see you again, I suppose, until the happy moment when we—we—meet at the altar. That's it. That's the proper expression, isn't it?"

Pauline looked up at him with a smile, but it was but an outward one. He was just in the sort of mood he had been in that night at Atherley, which she so well remembered; and she was always a little afraid of him then.

"What an awfully jolly-looking bride you will make. I shall be in the seventh heaven," he said.

"Let me go, dear Guy. Good-bye. Do take care what you are doing in London."

"No, not good-bye yet, I want to look at you a little longer. It's always pleasant to look at something beautiful, you know. My wife! What a charming idea, to have a beautiful wife to take about with you!"

"Don't talk in that way, Guy. Let me go."

"Very well. Good-bye. I declare it's good-bye for the last time, pretty pet. How charming! Meet to part no more, and all that kind of thing, next time, you know."

He bestowed a parting embrace on her, and let her go. His caresses were not very frequent, nor did Pauline much appreciate them. There was a good deal of careless familiarity about them certainly, but very little of anything else; and Pauline had more than once registered a resolution that she would teach Guy, the

moment their use was over, to be extremely sparing in such demonstrations. And that resolution she renewed as she went upstairs that night. She might have spared herself the trouble.

They were busy enough at Atherley as soon as they returned. The marriage was to be celebrated with the utmost gaiety. All the county was to see that it could be done there in a style befitting the bride's future position; and Pauline had quite enough on her own hands to make the time pass rapidly. Yet still she could hardly realise the fact that she had triumphed. She almost felt, at times, as if it was a dream, from which she would suddenly wake.

One morning as she was writing letters in the drawing-room, her mother came in. Pauline did not look up. Mrs. Lisle fidgeted about the room for a few moments in silence, and then asked—"Pauline, have you heard anything from the priory lately?"

Something in her mother's tone made Pauline look up, and then she started to her feet, exclaiming—"Oh, mamma! what is the matter? What has happened?" Mrs. Lisle was perfectly white, and trembling violently.

"Oh, my dear child!" she almost gasped.

"Tell me, mamma, quickly," Pauline said, convulsively, grasping the back of a chair.

"Mrs. Darryll is dead," said her mother.

"Then the marriage must be put off——"

For once nature had conquered, and she spoke the first thought that came into her mind, without pausing to think whether it was a thought befitting the moment or not. More than once, lately, the halting footstep had sounded near, especially when Mrs. Wellwood had talked of retribution, and given her Frank's message; but it had never sounded so near as it did at that moment, when her mother's sudden announcement told her her marriage must be put off for a time.

She stood there, pale and silent, leaning heavily on the chair for some moments before it occurred to her to ask—

"What was the cause of Mrs. Darryll's death?"

"I don't know," replied her mother. "I do not even know for certain that the report is true. But the servants have heard it. It must have been something very sudden, I think, for I had not heard of Mrs. Darryll having been ill. It is really dreadful, and most awkward, too, at this moment. I hardly know what we can do."

"Do!" replied Pauline; "we can do simply nothing;" and drawing a long deep breath, as if to relieve some heavy oppression, she left the room.

Mrs. Lisle had not quite spoken the truth. It was not only the bare fact of Mrs. Darryll's reported death which had made her tremble and turn pale; but Pauline had seemed so shaken by the announcement that she had not the courage to tell her what she had heard, until the dark rumour had received some further confirmation.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE TRAIN WORKS WELL.

DAY BY DAY, after her interview with Guy, the dean watched his child with increasing anxiety, in dread that the heavy trial under which she was bearing up so bravely might really injure her health; and with unwearying care he sought to provide her with every possible object which could interest or amuse her.

"How kind you are, papa," she said, one day, with tearful eyes, as some fresh proof of his constant thoughtfulness for her came before her. "What should I do without your love to help me now?"

"Maud, my child," he replied, "I wish I could persuade you to leave home at once."

"No, papa, not yet. I will not go sooner than I said before. Don't think I am obstinate about this. I know it seems ungrateful to

oppose your wishes when you are so kind to me, but I really cannot go. If I left home now, I don't think I ever could come back; and besides that, I know rumours are abroad to which nothing can so effectually put a stop as my remaining here. They would gain ground directly if we were to go away."

"But it is such a trial for you."

"Not a harder one than I can bear, though I don't deny it is very heavy sometimes."

"I don't believe a heavier trial ever fell to the share of any woman in this world," replied her father, "or was ever more bravely and Christianly borne."

"It would be ungrateful to bear it otherwise. I know well there is infinite mercy in all that has happened. God only knows what untold misery this sharp trial may save me. If only," she added, in a lower tone, "I could know that he was dead."

The dean almost shuddered. The significance of the words was terrible. She had learned to look upon the death of the man she had so dearly loved as the most desirable event that could happen. And what must she not have passed through before she could have reached that point?

"Is that a right wish, Maud, for him?" he asked, gravely.

"Yes, I think so, papa. I have thought a great deal over it, and I do think it is. I have even gone further than that, I have learned to pray that it may be so. That is to say, if it is as I believe, that it is the only chance he may be saved from utter ruin. I do not believe he is accountable now for all he does. Poor fellow! and with such a wife, what hope for him?"

The dean said no more, but the next morning Maud herself brought up the subject again.

"Papa," she said, "we must have no more such discussions as yesterday. I am weaker than I thought I was. I cannot bear it. Nay, don't look so anxious," she added, with a smile; "I am not going to die of a broken heart. I shall get over this, I know quite well; and even at this moment, I believe there may be many happy years in store for me; but still, for the present I cannot talk about it."

This was very shortly after Maud's interview with Guy in the cathedral; and after that the subject was dropped between her and her father. Calmly and firmly she had taken up her cross, and bravely she was bearing it; fulfilling all her duties, just as she had done before, and

boldly facing the many painful remarks she was, from time to time, forced to hear. The gossips of the neighbourhood were fairly puzzled. They could not even say she looked ill; only that she had suddenly grown much older looking; and if all that was rumoured had been true, it was impossible she could go on as she did. Many a one would have liked to have made some investigations on the subject; but there had always been an amount of quiet dignity about Maud Vernon which effectually checked impertinence, and it seemed rather increased now; so she was spared that, at least.

There were moments of weakness, however, when she could almost have exclaimed that her burden was too heavy for her to bear; and when she was prostrate in her deep and bitter grief. But they did not come often, and she resolutely struggled against them; striving never, for an instant, to look forward to the future which looked so very dark, but to fix her thoughts on the present moment, trusting that, should it ever be that darker trials must come, the same strength which upheld her now would support her then.

She had seen very little of Mrs. Darryll since the breaking off of her engagement. On this

the dean had himself insisted, saying to Mrs. Darryll that he thought it better for the present that Maud should have as little as possible to remind her of the past. His stronger reason for this determination he could hardly have told, as it was simply the conviction that, without any consideration of her relationship to Guy Rivers, Mrs. Darryll was far too great a tax upon Maud at all times, to be anything now, if much with her, but a very considerable addition to her trials. Maud felt the relief which she never would have sought for herself, and was really thankful for it. She felt that the occasional intercourse which was still kept up between the deanery and the priory was quite as much as she could well bear.

Isabel had acquiesced much more quietly in the dean's decision than Maud had expected she would. She was evidently very full of something wonderfully important, at least in her eyes, and still bitter to the last degree against Pauline Lisle, and all her family.

"I cannot help thinking, Edgar," she said, "that if Guy could only be got away from those horrid people, it is not impossible a reconciliation might yet be effected between him and Maud."

"My dear Isabel, have you taken leave of your senses?" exclaimed her husband.

"No, most certainly I have not. Guy was always so easily led that I don't doubt they have imposed upon him in some way. Pauline thus often talked about Maud to me, and I dare say they have told him things, and said I had said so! If I could only find out about it, and get Guy away, I really don't think it might be impossible."

"If you could succeed in getting him out of those people's hands, you would do your brother a greater service than he could ever repay. But as to a reconciliation between him and Maud, it is folly to dream of such a thing."

"I don't see that, Edgar."

"My dear Isabel, do you really suppose Maud would ever be moved to consider such a thing for a moment?"

"I don't see that it is at all impossible."

"Then I can only say that you know her very little. Guy has thrown away his chance of winning one of the noblest women that ever lived, and no power on earth can ever give it back to him."

"You are very enthusiastic on the subject; I did not know you so fully appreciated Maud,"

she replied. In her present frame of mind she was well pleased to hear him speak of Maud in such terms.

A consciousness that he would not quite have liked his wife to see exactly to what extent he did appreciate Maud Vernon kept Edgar Darryll silent.

"Still," Mrs. Darryll continued, "I don't agree with you about a reconciliation."

"At any rate, Isabel," her husband said earnestly, "whatever you do, don't, at present at least, let the slightest hint of such an idea escape you. Be sure of that. If you care to try and get hold of Guy, in Heaven's name, do it. I'd give half my fortune to see him well out of this scrape; and I only wish I could say I hope, one quarter as sincerely as I wish, you may succeed. But don't move one step further than that, at present."

"Why not?"

"Because, granting even—which I do not believe—that there is the faintest hope, your giving the least hint of such a thing would ruin all."

This was the project which was so fully occupying Mrs. Darryll's thoughts; and this the cause of those letters to Guy, which had so

disturbed Pauline. For once she set about her task with considerable skill. Mindful of her husband's earnest exhortations, she carefully avoided breathing a word about any chance of a reconciliation between Maud and himself. She only told Guy how grieved both she and Edgar were at what had happened; and that, as Pauline was, she was certain, fully aware all the time of his engagement to Maud, it was impossible a girl capable of acting as she had done could ever make him happy; and so she urged him to pause before it was too late. She entreated him to come over to the priory, and discuss the matter with Edgar and herself; promising that they would leave no means untried to free him from this unfortunate entanglement.

The letter was a very sensible one. There was a wonderful difference between Mrs. Darryll's views of things in which she was personally interested, and of those in which she was not. In the latter case she could both speak and write, at times, with considerable force. The letter was not without its effect on Guy, and had he received it when beyond the reach of Pauline's baleful influence, it might perhaps have led to important results. As it was,

though his answer was hurried, and only repeated his oft-renewed declaration that there was no hope, still there was something about it which showed Mrs. Darryll her words had taken hold. Guy was evidently touched by the kind and gentle way in which she had written. In a high state of excitement, and confidence of ultimate success, she sat down and wrote again; and then almost immediately came that letter from Pauline, which had so roused Mrs. Darryll's indignation; followed by her hasty answer, and Pauline's subsequent visit to the priory.

Pauline Lisle had driven home, rejoicing in her conviction that she had effectually put an end to all chance of any attempts, on Mrs. Darryll's part, to bring about a reconciliation between Guy Rivers and Maud Vernon; but little dreaming of the full effect of her words. She never made mischief without some reason; and as she had no reason for wishing it made between Mrs. Darryll and her husband, she had, as she thought, very carefully avoided saying anything that might rouse suspicions on Isabel's part against him. She had certainly most effectually accomplished her purpose, but she had done a great deal more than that.

She had equally effectually roused a spirit which could never be laid to rest again, and whose workings must inevitably lead to some disastrous result.

Mrs. Darryll did not yield to the dark suspicions which Pauline's words had roused without a struggle, but it was a vain one. Day and night her morbidly vivid imagination dwelt with unhealthy activity on what she had heard, and small chance the voice of reason had in the contest. Never accustomed to control, in the least, her unfounded fancies, there was little prospect of her succeeding now, when they had been so artfully excited. One circumstance after another came back to her memory, in a shape so distorted by the ruling feeling of the moment, that each one seemed to give fresh confirmation to the truth of what had been suggested to her, and of a great deal more besides.

The evident embarrassment with which Edgar and Maud had met, the first time after his marriage, recurred to her thoughts again; and even granting that Maud's explanation was correct—which now she began to doubt—why should such a report ever have arisen? Then came the remembrance of Edgar's evident annoyance when she had told him of the question Pauline

had asked, just before they went to Riverston—of Maud's energetic defence of him, when her own suspicions had been aroused against him—of Maud's expressed unwillingness to undertake the task of mediation between her husband and herself, and of how effectual her influence had proved when she did consent to speak to him. Fool that she had been, never to suspect the truth; why, that alone ought to have excited her suspicions. No wonder, either, that Maud had so constantly endeavoured to impress upon her the fact that she was naturally jealous. Of course it was the very thing she would wish to make her believe. This, too, accounted for Edgar's extreme distress and anxiety about Maud; it was only assumed because it was the right thing, and was, like most assumptions, rather overdone; and a dread that he might fail to play his part properly was the cause of his wish to leave the priory at once. This was the cause doubtless, as well, of Maud's bearing up so firmly under the trial. She had wondered how she could be so firm, but there was little cause for surprise. After all, it was not she that had been made a tool of by Pauline Lisle; but oh! far worse, she had been cruelly and doubly deceived, and Guy had been made a tool of. At

first she almost resolved to seek an explanation from him; but as she brooded over her imagined wrongs, she began to suspect him also. Why had he not told her at once if he had discovered the truth? It looked very much as if it was no discovery to him, but he had been a willing tool; and that would account for his positive determination not to allow her to draw him away from Pauline. Back into the twilight went her bat-like thoughts, to brood in darkness over her suspicions, carefully shunning the clear light of straightforward open enquiry after the truth. How they must all have been laughing at her blind confidence, that was the most goading thought of all. And how entirely alone she stood; not a friend on whom she could depend, and cruelly deceived by those who ought to have been, and who professed to have been, her most faithful friends. Her husband false, in thought at least, if no worse. Her most trusted friend equally false, and her own brother leagued with them both in making her their wretched dupe. A perfect storm of jealous resentment swept over her rapidly darkening mind as she thought of it; accompanied with a vehement and steadily increasing thirst for vengeance. She did not reach this point all in a moment, but the poison

worked with terrible rapidity, on the frame so exactly suited, both physically and mentally, for its operations.

All this time, in perfect unconsciousness of the storm that was threatening his domestic life, Edgar Darryll was constantly giving his wife fresh cause for believing what she had been told. Everything he did was viewed in the one light, and his constant and open recurrence to all that had passed seemed to her only a proof of his entire confidence in her blindness. But not a trace of any uneasiness did she show. With desperate determination she concealed every feeling, and treated both him and Maud exactly as she had done before — a strange amount of self-command for her, and as deadly as strange.

Nevertheless her husband was not easy about her. There were physical, if not mental, signs that all was not right. She was beginning to look fearfully ill. Maud noticed it as well, and she was conscious, too, of a certain undefinable change in her which she could not understand, but which excited her alarm.

"Isabel, I am sure you are not well," she said one morning, when Mrs. Darryll came down to the deanery.

"Indeed I am, Maud. I am quite as well as I have been for a long time."

"You don't look so."

"Don't I? I daresay it is the hot weather; it does make me feel a little languid, I must confess; but that really is the only reason I know of for my looking ill. Have you seen Edgar this morning?"

"No," answered Maud, rather surprised at the question, for Edgar Darryll was not in the habit of paying morning visits at the deanery. "What made you think he was here?"

"Oh, nothing; only he went out this morning, to the garden, as I thought, and I wanted to speak to him, and couldn't find him; so I thought perhaps he had come over here. I must go, dear Maud. I have a thousand things to do this morning. Good-bye."

"You don't look fit to do ten things, Isabel, let alone a thousand," Maud said earnestly.

"Ah, looks are very deceptive sometimes," she answered. "No one would think at this moment, to look at you, how deeply you have suffered."

Maud looked up in surprise. The subject was, at her own request, a forbidden one, and Mrs. Darryll's allusion to it startled her, not more

though than did the momentary expression she caught on her face.

"You forget, Isabel," she said gravely, "you are breaking our compact."

"Ah! true. Forgive me. But the fact is, you look so exactly like yourself that I forget sometimes."

"I wish you would try to remember," Maud replied.

"I will, indeed. I am so sorry, dear Maud, that I should have pained you."

And she stooped and kissed her, and then, with almost a shudder, she turned and left the room.

Maud was thoroughly alarmed. Surely, she thought, her own sad thoughts had made her less observant than usual, or she would have been more uneasy before now.

That very afternoon she met Edgar Darryll in the cloisters, and expressed her fears to him.

"I am sure, Edgar, she is ill, though she will not confess it."

"So I have thought for some time. But she will not allow that there is anything the matter."

"Does she seem at all irritable or restless?" Maud asked.

"Not in the least. I have not seen her so quiet, and free from all excitability, for a long time; and that," he added, laughing, "is not generally her case when she is not well, as you know."

"Still, Edgar, I am certain ——." Maud paused abruptly, for Isabel herself suddenly turned the corner of the cloisters. She was very pale, but she laughed gaily as she came up.

"Ah! what a pity it is only you, Maud. Here would have been a fine opportunity for a scene if I had only caught Edgar indulging in a little flirtation—quite harmless, of course—in the calm seclusion of the cloisters. But, pray, what were you so certain about?"

"About you," replied Maud. "We were talking about you."

"So you see, my dear Isabel," said her husband, "your appearance at the moment was rather unfortunate."

"I don't doubt that," she answered; "but what were you saying about me, Maud?"

"That I am sure you are far from well."

"What nonsense!" she replied. "How you do keep harping upon that. I'm afraid," she added, with rather a bitter laugh, "you'll find I'm tougher than I look."

Talking about her health, were they? Discussing, doubtless, the probability that the only bar between them might be removed. That was the reason, was it, of so much watchfulness and anxiety about her health? And she suddenly determined that she would be more careful of it than she had been, and would not any longer leave unnoticed several symptoms which had appeared of late. But they should not know she was doing anything of the kind. The result of this determination was that she wrote a note to Doctor Marsh, requesting him to come and see her the next day, at an hour when she knew Edgar would not be at home, and begging him not to mention to any one that she had sent for him. Wondering not a little what this unexpected summons might portend, Doctor Marsh went to the priory at the appointed time. It was more than two hours before he left the house again; and when he did, it was with such a look of intense anxiety upon his face as was not often to be seen there. He had stayed so much longer than Mrs. Darryll expected that he met Edgar Darryll a very short distance from the gates.

"Hulloa, doctor!" exclaimed he, pulling up his horse. "I don't often meet you up here. Have you been at the priory?"

"Yes, I have," replied Doctor Marsh, looking up at him with a face so full of grave compassion that Mr. Darryll was startled.

"Is there anything wrong?" he asked.

"A great deal. Mrs. Darryll is in a most unsatisfactory state of health."

"Just exactly what I thought," replied Edgar; "but how did you find it out?"

"She sent for me."

"No; did she? Why, I have been entreating her to have some advice for a long time, and she has steadily persisted in declaring that there was nothing the matter, both to me and Miss Vernon."

"Do you mean that you did not know she had sent for me?"

"Yes, I do. I knew nothing on earth about it."

"She asked me to say nothing to you about her," replied Doctor Marsh; "saying you were so unnecessarily alarmed about her; but I had no idea you did not know she had sent for me."

"I never heard a word about it. But what is wrong, doctor?"

"A great deal is wrong; but I must have a longer conversation with you on that point than

we could hold here. Will you come and dine with me to-morrow evening?"

"Willingly."

"Very good, and in the mean time don't say a word to your wife to lead her to think you have seen me; and, above all, don't let her know where you are going to-morrow night. I wish this particularly, mind; and now we had better not stand talking here. Good-bye."

"Poor fellow!" Doctor Marsh said to himself, as he walked away. "It will be a terrible blow to him. Not that I believe he is very devoted to her; but still it is such an awful prospect." And then the doctor's thoughts flew suddenly back to years long gone, and to the first time he had ever seen Lady Clara Rivers, and stood almost spell-bound by her wonderful beauty. Could it be possible the unhappy woman he had just left could really be her child? It seemed hardly possible. How well it was she had died; and how well too, for Sir Rupert, that he had not lived himself to see the children of his ill-fated marriage grow up.

"I am not going to dine at home to-night, Isabel," Edgar Darryll said to his wife the next morning, as he rose from breakfast; "and I

shall very likely be very late; so I shall sleep in my own dressing-room."

This was a constant habit with him when very late. Mrs. Darryll was such a bad sleeper that, if once disturbed, she rarely closed her eyes again the whole night.

"Where are you going to dine?" she asked.

"That's a secret," he answered, laughing. "I'm going to spend a jovial evening with an old friend of my bachelor days."

He was looking at the paper as he spoke; so the glance his wife gave him escaped his notice.

"Shall you see Maud to-day?" she asked.

"No, certainly not. That is to say, not unless I should meet her accidentally out. Why do you ask?"

"Because I want a book taken to her, and I thought you would give it her if you were going there. I shall not go out to-day. I have such a headache."

"You had better send some one down with it then. I am not in the least likely to be near the deanery at all to-day."

"But do tell me, Edgar, where you are going to dine."

"It's a secret, I tell you."

"What nonsense! I believe you are going over to Atherley."

"What! to see that cursed girl? Heaven forbid! I only wish I could hope I might never see her again."

"You should not be so vindictive, Edgar. And really, after all, I don't see what harm Pauline Lisle has done you."

There was a half-sneer in the tone, which made her husband look up at her, and catch the expression of her face. It made him shudder, without knowing why. It passed in a moment, however, as she saw the look on his face; and she smiled at him, saying—

"I was only joking, Edgar. You need not look so scandalised. I never really supposed that you were going to Atherley; nor do I care about knowing where you are going. Only, for goodness sake, don't make a noise when you come in. I think I get worse and worse about sleeping. The least thing ruins my night's rest now, and it's not much to speak of when I do get it."

Edgar Darryll had never found Doctor Marsh so dull a companion as he proved all through dinner. In spite of his efforts to be as cheerful as usual, it was very apparent that the cheer-

fulness was only assumed, and the disguise was very transparent. The moment they were left alone, Edgar introduced the subject.

"Doctor, your look and manner all through dinner have made me feel horribly anxious. Do tell me at once what you have to say."

It was a very hard task, and so Doctor Marsh felt it. But he knew the time was come when the truth could not be concealed longer from Edgar Darryll; and as gently and kindly as it could be done, he gradually broke it to him, and told him the same sad story he had before told Maud Vernon.

It was a long time before Edgar Darryll seemed in the least able to realise the truth. The blow was almost harder for him than it had been for Maud Vernon. Doctor Marsh could not speak so hopefully to him, for the future, as he had done to her; and then, come what might, there was no possibility of escape for him. Yet entirely unnerved as he seemed at first to be, Doctor Marsh could not but see that the blow had not the terrible weight for him that a very deep affection for his wife would have given it. In that respect, at least, it could not fall on him as it had fallen on Maud.

"It is a terrible thing for you to hear," Doctor Marsh said, at last, "and a hard task to me to have to tell you. I sometimes could almost wish I had never entered that house. This is the second time it has been forced upon me to tell this sad tale."

"The second time! When have you told it before?"

"I had to tell Maud Vernon."

"Do you mean that she knows this?"

"She has known it for months; ever since I first heard of her engagement. I told her directly."

"Then that accounts for her conduct! I have often wondered at the way she has taken Rivers' conduct. I could not understand her not resenting the insult she had received. But you may well say it is a terrible thing for me to hear. Why did you never tell me before?"

"There was no need. I had hoped there might be none."

"Then why do you tell me now? Do you mean that it is a hopeless case; that—that—my wife is positively deranged at this moment?" he added, with evident effort.

"No, I don't mean that. Not at least in the sense in which you understand the word;

but I mean that her mind is so far off the balance that the least trifle might produce the most fatal consequences; and that, if you do not take instant steps for having her placed under proper treatment, there can be little doubt what the result must inevitably be, before very long."

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Edgar, "what a prospect! My poor Isabel! You may well call them an ill-fated family."

"There is one point, however, which is so far encouraging, and that is what I want particularly to ask you about. It is perfectly clear to me, by all she said, though she was evidently most anxious to conceal the fact, that there is some very strong exciting cause for her present state. This is of course better than that she should have become so seriously worse without any cause at all; as it gives every hope that, with its removal, she may improve. But have you no idea what it can be?"

"She has been deeply distressed by this unhappy affair of Rivers."

"That will not account for it. The cause of her present excited state must be something more absolutely personal."

"Then I cannot imagine what it can be. She

has not said a word that would afford me any clue."

"I wish very much you could find out what it is. There is some mischief at work, I am certain. Her whole conduct during our interview yesterday convinced me she was concealing something; though she was evidently anxious about herself, and that her health should not fail."

"I can't understand it. All this time she has been protesting, both to Miss Vernon and myself, that there was nothing the matter; and she never gave me the slightest hint that she had sent for you."

Doctor Marsh thought for a few moments. "That all looks bad," he said, at last. "There is something in all this I cannot fathom, and yet it is most important to know what it is. Do you not think Miss Vernon could throw any light on the subject?"

"I don't know, and I shouldn't like to ask her."

"Why not?"

"She has enough to bear, poor girl, without having any fresh cause for anxiety added to it."

"No; you are wrong there. It will be by no means bad for her to have her thoughts

drawn away from her own trials. I wish you would consult her at once on the subject. Could you not go up to the deanery now? I am really anxious no time should be lost."

"I will, if you like."

"Well, do, and come back afterwards, and let me know what Miss Vernon says."

Edgar Darryll departed on his errand, feeling still half-stunned by what he had heard; but, at the same time, with a newly acquired consciousness that he cared more for his wife than he had known himself, until that moment. He had honestly fought hard against a feeling it had been hard to struggle against; and, of late, Isabel's irritability and wayward caprices had made it harder, and been, at the same time, a severe strain upon his patience and forbearance. But now the fatal truth had burst upon him, he could feel no irritation against her for all her foibles—nothing but the deepest, tenderest pity; and with that feeling came the consciousness of an amount of affection he did not know he possessed for her. Was that consciousness only just dawning, in time to make his future prospects seem darker, or to save him from the danger of what he felt must prove a closer tie between Maud and himself? How deeply they

both seemed doomed to suffer from their connection with the Riverses.

Maud was alone, as Edgar had hoped he might find her; and it needed very few words to let her know that he knew all now, and why Doctor Marsh had told him. But not the slightest light could she throw on Isabel's present state, though she admitted how much alarmed she had been by her manner the last time she had seen her.

"There was something about her which I could hardly define, not in the least like herself. Oh, Edgar! you must leave no means untried to find out what it is. It may be the means of saving her yet."

"If she had seen that cursed girl," Edgar exclaimed, bitterly, "I could believe she had some hand in it."

"Hush, hush!" Maud said, earnestly; "you must not speak so."

"Isn't it the truth?"

"No. Who shall dare estimate the amount of another's guilt? and," she added, with a slight tremour in her voice, "Miss Lisle is laying up in store for herself a retribution which may well make you withhold your curses."

Edgar was silent, repenting that he had

rashly said words he knew must pain her; and wondering, as he had often wondered before, at her quiet endurance, until Maud asked some further question about Isabel, and then gently and earnestly sought to induce him still to hope, and to give such consolation as could be given at such a moment.

"It is clear," he said, at last, "you can give no information, so I must go back to Doctor Marsh, and take counsel with him. It is getting late. Good night, Maud. God bless you for all your gentle words. It is rather too much, I know, to have forced the task of administering consolation on you; but no one else could have done as much as you have."

"There is no teacher like experience, Edgar," she answered, with a sad smile, as she held out her hand.

He took it, and gravely, almost reverentially, raised it to his lips, and then left her. As he closed the door, a tall, slight figure glided out from the shelter of a large shrub, growing in full view of the open window of the drawing-room, and noiselessly crossing the lawn, towards the gate leading to the priory, disappeared in the darkness.

CHAPTER IX.

THE MINE EXPLODES.

It was very late before Edgar Darryll reached home, and crept quietly up to his dressing-room, but with little thought of going to bed. He sat at the window, watching the dawn of the early summer morning, and thinking bitterly of the dark cloud that had settled down upon his own life, and of how he was to manage all that Doctor Marsh had insisted upon should be done immediately, without rousing Isabel's suspicions, until the servants' breakfast-bell startled him to a sudden remembrance that Isabel sometimes came into his dressing-room in the morning, when she left her own, and that it would not be well that she should find him, if she came, sitting there in evening dress. He hastily concluded his morning's toilet, and went downstairs. In the hall he met Isabel's maid.

"Is your mistress come down yet?" he asked.

"No, sir. I havn't been to her yet."

"Not been to her?" he repeated.

"No, sir. Mrs. Darryll went up to her room almost directly after dinner yesterday, saying she had so bad a headache she should go to bed at once. She wouldn't let me stay; she said she couldn't bear any one in the room, and she desired me not to go up this morning until she rang her bell."

"I'll go up to her room myself," Edgar answered, as he turned to re-ascend the stairs with a beating heart, and a sudden undefined sense of dread coming over him.

He knocked at Isabel's door, but there was no answer, and, opening it, he entered the room. It was empty. The bedclothes were disarranged, yet the bed hardly looked as if it had been slept in. The room was in much confusion. He looked into the dressing-room, but that, too, was empty, and in confusion. Edgar Darryll grew very pale, as he stood looking round; and suddenly, a note directed to himself, lying on the dressing-table, caught his eye. His hand trembled so much he could hardly open it, and he leaned against the dressing-room

door for support to his trembling limbs. The writing of the note was Isabel's, but so blurred and blotted, and traced with such an unsteady hand, that it was hardly legible. With difficulty Edgar deciphered even a part of its contents, but that part was quite enough to make him turn even paler than he was already, and tremble more violently. Crushing the note in his hand, he reeled across the room to a seat, and sank into it, with the helpless, bewildered look of a man paralysed by some sudden shock.

When Mrs. Darryll had told her maid, the night before, that she had a violent headache, she had only spoken the truth; and as soon as she was alone, she lay down on her bed, with her face buried on the pillows, in the vain attempt to find some relief in darkness and silence, but it was useless. Every moment her head seemed to throb more intensely, and with more maddening pain, and she felt more and more confused, and more hopelessly wretched. Every moment, too, her suspicions grew stronger, that her husband had gone to the deanery. It was almost the only idea that was at all distinct in her burning brain, and, at last, she started up, with a sudden determination to secure certainty on the subject. She looked at her watch,

it was nearly ten o'clock, and it was quite dark; there was no moon. With an outward calmness, terribly contrasting with the storm within, she wrapt a long dark cloak round her, and putting on a small, low-brimmed hat, she opened her door. All was quiet, and creeping downstairs, she entered the drawing-room. Noiselessly she unfastened one of the shutters, and opening the window, stepped out upon the lawn. She stood still for a moment, looking cautiously round, but everything was quiet; and rapidly crossing the lawn, she took the path that led to the deanery.

With a stealthy step she threaded her way among the shrubs on the deanery lawn, starting at every rustle of the leaves in the soft night air, until she gained a view of the drawing-room windows. They were wide open, and a stream of light fell from them across the lawn. But she would have to gain a different position before she could succeed in seeing into the room; and, to do that, she must cross the open lawn to the shelter of a shrub, growing straight in front of one of the windows, at some distance from the house. She could hardly summon courage, dark as it was, to leave the shelter of the friendly shrubs; but at last she did, and,

gaining the position she sought, she knelt down on the turf, and cautiously parting the boughs, as if she feared, even at that distance, and amid the darkness, her white face and gleaming eyes might be seen against the dark green foliage, she looked through, right into the brilliantly lighted room. She started and shuddered as she did so, and with difficulty suppressed a scream. By the table on which the lamp was standing Maud was seated; and, close to her, leaning against the window-frame, Edgar stood. Then all her suspicions were confirmed, and Pauline Lisle was right, even far beyond her own believing. What further doubt could she have? Had she not proof positive of a guilty assignation. Where was the dean? Gone out, doubtless; and this was why Edgar would not tell her where he was going. There was no doubt. What had been torturing suspicion before was maddening certainty now.

For more than an hour the unhappy woman knelt there, watching the two as they talked. If she could have reasoned, it might have struck her that the gloom of Edgar's knitted brow, and anxious expression, and the thoughtful sadness of Maud's face, as she talked, evidently so earnestly, yet so calmly, to him, were hardly in

keeping with her suspicions; but she could not think of anything now, all chance of that was past. She could, even where she was, catch the sound of their voices now and then, though not a word was distinctly audible. At last she saw her husband move, and then bend to kiss Maud's hand as they parted, and again the strong inclination to scream came upon her with almost over-mastering force, and she fled. Back to her own room she got, though how, she did not know. She was conscious now distinctly of nothing save maddening pain, which she must end in some way; and hastily seizing a sheet of paper, she traced, with a trembling hand, a torrent of bitter accusations and burning reproaches against both her husband and Maud; with a declaration that she could endure what she suffered no longer; and directing it to him, she laid it on the table, and then crept out of the house again.

Edgar Darryll did not sit long idle, after reading that note. The necessity for instant action roused him to a sort of desperate firmness, and quick thoughtfulness how best to meet what he dreaded. He glanced round the room—one or two touches would give it all the look it needed, and they were hastily given. Then,

after a moment's anxious thought, he rang the bell. Isabel's maid entered.

"Ross," he said, turning to her, "your mistress is not here."

"My gracious, sir! not here? Then she must have dressed by herself, and gone out to walk, as she used to do last summer."

"Exactly what I am afraid," he said; "and her not having returned makes me exceedingly uneasy about her."

"Dear me, sir, you do look quite pale; but no harm could come to her, taking a walk in the park, in the morning."

"I am by no means sure of that. These early walks are very bad for her. It is most imprudent of her to try them. The last time she took one she was quite faint with exhaustion when she came in, and I am really anxious now whether she may not have turned suddenly too faint to get back."

"Dear! dear! sir," exclaimed the maid, "what can we do?"

"I shall go and see, myself, whether she is anywhere near the house. Go down and ask whether any one saw her go out."

Not a soul had seen Mrs. Darryll. "She must have gone out of the drawing-room window,

however, sir," Ross said; "for the housemaid found one open when she went into the room this morning."

Edgar left the house, and without a moment's hesitation turned his steps in the direction of the lake. At the end nearest the house a high steep bank sloped down directly into the water, which was full twenty feet deep there. He felt almost suffocated as he made his way rapidly, by a short cut through the wood, to the lake, and came out upon the bank. A moment's glance at the surface of the lake, and his worst fears were realised. At a short distance from the bank a hat, which he recognised as belonging to Isabel, was floating on the water.

He stood for a moment looking at it. He did not feel surprised; in fact, he hardly knew what he felt, save that he was strangely cool and collected. As he turned from the water, his foot slipped on the slippery edge of the bank; and it was only by grasping the branch of an overhanging tree that he saved himself from sliding down into the water. An idea instantly darted across his mind. Firmly grasping the bough with one hand, he slid down the bank to the water's edge, cutting into the turf deeply with his boot heel as he did so. He did not care if

the bough did break, he was an expert swimmer; but it stood the strain, and brought him safely up again. Then, with a violent wrench, he succeeded in tearing it off the tree; and flinging it into the lake, he turned to retrace his steps, still feeling strangely cool. He had not gone many yards before he met the gamekeeper.

"Have you seen Mrs. Darryll, sir?" he began, but his master's face stopped him. Edgar silently took his arm, and pointed in the direction of the lake. The man saw the hat in a moment, and uttered an exclamation of horror.

"It's too late for any hope," Edgar said, hoarsely. "You must send for drags and ——" he stopped and pressed his hand to his forehead. The momentarily stunning effect of the shock was passing, and he began to feel giddy and confused.

"Come away up to the house, sir," the keeper said; "I'll see to everything. Good God! how could it have happened?"

"You'll see when you go up closer. Take care the bank isn't touched."

"I'll see to everything, sir; you come back to the house," replied the man; who thought his master looked very much as if he should have

to carry him there, if he did not reach it soon; and he almost dragged him away.

The news of what had happened spread rapidly, and before the body of Mrs. Darryll had been recovered, all Stowminster was in consternation. Doctor Marsh seized his hat and strode up to the priory, to find the dean had been before him, and was already with Mr. Darryll.

"Mr. Darryll desired you should be admitted, sir, if you came," the footman said.

"Have they found the body?" Doctor Marsh asked.

"Yes, sir. They've just sent up word that they have got it, but it hasn't been brought up to the house yet."

Doctor Marsh found the dean and Edgar Darryll in deep and anxious discussion.

"My dear Darryll!" he said, "this is too awful."

Edgar Darryll looked at him without speaking.

"How did it happen?" Doctor Marsh added, anxiously.

"Ah! I understand your question. The same terrible suspicion had occurred to the dean, after hearing from Maud of my visit last night; but you will be glad to learn that there is the strongest

evidence possible, under the circumstances, that my poor wife's death was entirely the result of an accident."

Doctor Marsh gave him a searching glance; but though he looked fearfully haggard, he was perfectly collected, and boldly returned the glance. His determination had been taken, from the first moment. Not a soul should ever know the truth. They might suspect what they pleased; but none should ever know, save himself, that his unhappy wife had died by her own rash act, in a sudden frenzy of jealous despair; though what had brought her to that state was as much a mystery to him as the whole thing, he was determined, should be to every one else.

"I am much relieved to hear it," replied Doctor Marsh, in a somewhat doubtful tone.

"It is a great consolation to me," said Edgar, "as of course a coroner's inquest cannot be avoided. Will you go down to the lake, doctor, and look at the place. I think you will then agree with me that there is positive proof of some one having slipped down the bank; and that, with the broken bough floating in the water, tells its own tale. I must leave everything in your own hands and the dean's."

He was about to leave the room, but Doctor Marsh stopped him. "Wait a few moments," he said.

Edgar looked at him in some surprise; and then his ear, too, caught the sound Doctor Marsh had heard—a confused sound in the hall of heavy footsteps, and low murmuring of many voices. Edgar knew what it meant, and turned with a shudder towards another door, which led into the dining-room.

The dean and Doctor Marsh walked down to the lake, and looked at the place, spoke a few words to the man the keeper had left in charge, and then slowly retraced their steps towards the house. They walked on in silence for some time, until at last the dean suddenly stopped, and, turning to Doctor Marsh, said—

"Do you believe this to be an accident, doctor?"

"She is Lady Bellingham's granddaughter," was the significant answer.

"Do you think Darryll really believes it was accidental?"

"He either suspects, and is determined not to know, or he knows, and is determined no one else shall, I do not know which. In either case, his feelings deserve every respect. Poor fellow!

his distress last night was very painful to witness. He never seems to have had the least suspicion of anything of the kind. There is no attempting to be blind to the truth, Mr. Dean, that, after the first shock of this terrible affair is over, it cannot but be a relief to him. If her mind had fairly given way, which I can hardly think could have been prevented, she would have been no ordinary patient. It would have been a peculiarly distressing case for all her friends."

"Terrible!" murmured the dean, thinking even then more of his child than anything else; and thanking God, even more earnestly than he had done yet, for the stroke, deeply though it had wounded, which had severed her connection with the Riverses. The thought suggested his next question.

"Is there any chance, think you, of anything of this kind, with Rivers?"

"Not the least, I think," replied Doctor Marsh. "I don't think there would ever be any danger with him. He is more likely to end his life in some mad frolic than anything else."

There was nothing more that they could do there, and so they left the house together; Doctor Marsh to make all arrangements for Edgar

Darryll; the dean to break the intelligence to his daughter, which he had strictly forbidden should be allowed to reach her until his return. It was chiefly when anything startling or unexpected happened that Maud showed how much the strain on her had told. Her nerves were not what they had been. She could not take everything with the calm composure she had always done until the last few months. Even an unexpected noise would make her start and tremble now.

The dean made up his mind that she should never know the dark suspicions in the minds of both Doctor Marsh and himself. She too should believe that Isabel's death was purely accidental; and so he gently broke the truth to her, and gave her a simple account of all he had seen, and heard; Edgar's account of what had happened that morning, and his own, of the evident marks of a fall on the bank of the lake, and of the broken bough floating on the water. Maud was, as he expected, terribly overcome; but if any suspicions crossed her own mind, she said not a word to her father on the subject.

"Poor, poor Isabel!" she said, "and yet, oh, papa! perhaps it is better so."

The very words Mrs. Feversham had used

years ago; but the dean's answer was somewhat different from Mr. Feversham's, though prompted by the same thoughts. "Thank God!" he said, "that she has left no children."

When Edgar Darryll was left alone, he went up to the room where the body of his wife was lying, and stood looking at her long and earnestly. And even then, as he stood beside the bed, he admitted to himself that it was better to see her there, cold and dead, than to have seen her as he might have done, had she lived. And he knew he could love her better dead than living. All her faults and failings, so fully accounted for now, might rest in the grave; and the memory only lived with him of what she was in her brighter moments. There was a wonderful calmness and peace about her face now; and he marvelled that he had never noticed before how very handsome she was. She had surely never looked like that in life. Then as he stood there, he realised for the first time how terribly she had changed during the last few months. The look on her face carried his thoughts back to what she had been when he first saw her, little more than two years before; and he wondered he could have been so long blind to the gradual change that had come over

her. The contrast made him shudder, and almost brought the sense of relief of which Doctor Marsh had spoken to the dean. Her face was so calm and peaceful that she looked more like sleep than death. If only she had not died with such bitter thoughts of him in her mind. That was the hardest part of it now; and all the harder because he knew, only too well, that, false and utterly unfounded as her suspicions had been, still a sight of his inmost thoughts, could she but have seen them, would not have tended to remove them. But he knew that he had been honestly in error when he made her his wife, and that he had fought hard against himself since he had found out the truth; and there was great consolation in that remembrance now.

The inquest was the thing he dreaded most; until that was over, he could not breathe freely. A word might give the clue; and ignorant as he was of all that had passed, from the time Ross told him Isabel had gone to her room, until the moment when he had entered it the next morning, he was in constant dread lest any one might be able to give information which should lead to a discovery of the truth; and then he dreaded too what Doctor Marsh

might say; while yet he dare not say a word to him on the subject. The same idea had occurred to the dean.

"You are sure to be questioned," he said, to Doctor Marsh. "It cannot be concealed that you saw Mrs. Darryll professionally, the day before her death."

"And I shall probably be asked the question direct whether I saw anything in her to excite my suspicions. I am thankful, for poor Darryll's sake, that my answer is easy enough. When I saw her, there was nothing about her in any way to excite my alarm on that point; and, of course, I merely state what I then professionally observed."

The inquest was very short. Edgar Darryll's evidence was given firmly and collectedly; but it was perfectly easy to see his composure was only maintained by a tremendous effort; and he looked so fearfully ill that there was evidently every wish on the part of the coroner to spare him to the utmost. There was not a shadow of ground for any suspicion of foul play; and so, after visiting and gravely inspecting the scene of the accident, and explaining to their own entire satisfaction, and the great enlightenment of the bystanders, how impossible it was that any one slipping down the steep bank could

avoid falling into the water, the jury unanimously returned a verdict of accidental death, without even a moral appended, as they could hardly ground a protest, either against ornamental water or early morning walks, on the evidence they had heard; and Edgar Darryll might safely count upon carrying his sad secret to the grave with him, unless he chose to divulge it. He had kept Isabel's hasty note carefully by him; feeling that did any suspicions arise against any one, he must, at any amount of personal suffering, proclaim the truth; but the night after the inquest he burned it in his dressing-room. It was a terrible last legacy, and one he had no wish to keep, and would willingly have blotted from his memory could he have done so. He had only now to wait the few days which must pass before the funeral, and then he was free to leave the scene of so many painful memories—for ever, if he chose.

Mrs. Lisle soon heard full confirmation of the rumours which had reached Atherley as to the cause of Mrs. Darryll's death, yet she shrank from telling Pauline. Such a terrible accident seemed such a sad omen, so immediately preceding her marriage. At last Pauline asked the question herself.

"Mamma, have you not heard yet what was the cause of Mrs. Darryll's death?"

"Yes, my dear, I have. It is too dreadful. I was quite afraid to tell you."

"What do you mean, mamma?"

"She was drowned in the lake, my dear."

"Drowned!" gasped Pauline, and her face became almost livid. "How?"

"She went out to walk early in the morning, and didn't come in; and when Mr. Darryll went to look for her, he saw her hat floating on the water, and ——" but she did not finish the sentence, for Pauline suddenly fainted.

It had been too much, the horrible suspicion which darted across her mind when she first heard the cause of Mrs. Darryll's death. She did not come to herself for a long time, and then she lay in silent torture, longing and yet dreading to ask for further particulars; but at last she could bear it no longer, and so she asked—

"How came Isabel to get into the lake, mamma?"

Mrs. Lisle gave her the account of the accident, and Pauline breathed more freely; and yet, from time to time, a terrible dread would come over her, which she could not shake off,

do what she would; and from that day, no one ever heard Pauline Lisle mention the name of Isabel Darryll.

Guy Rivers came down, of course, to the funeral. He could not well do otherwise, though he would willingly have avoided it if he could. The news of his sister's death had been a great shock to him, and checked him, for a time, in his wild career. He would not stay at the priory one moment longer than was absolutely necessary; only came over in the morning from Riverston, and declared his intention of returning the same evening.

"Nonsense, Rivers! you cannot do that," Edgar remonstrated. "There are several business arrangements you and I must settle. You must stay to-night."

Very reluctantly Guy yielded; but nothing would induce him to leave the house again that day, and his brother-in-law divined his feelings too well to interfere. He was as shocked as every one else at the change in Guy. Even his dress and personal appearance were beginning to bear their silent yet significant testimony to his rapid downward course. His ill-kept hair, untrimmed beard and moustache, and carelessness about his dress, were a terrible contrast to

the fastidious refinement and good taste for which he had always been so remarkable before; and as Edgar looked at him, he could not resist an earnest wish that no unlucky accident might cause Maud to see him. Edgar had intended making one last appeal to him to save himself, but as he looked at him, such a strong conviction came that it was useless that he abandoned the attempt.

They sat in gloomy silence after dinner, until at last Guy suddenly exclaimed—

"One more, and then it's over."

"What do you mean?" asked Edgar, in surprise.

"Why, don't you see, it only needs me to break my neck now, and then all the blood of the Veres will have passed out of the Rivers family in the same way; and upon my word, I don't think it will be long first; and a precious good thing, too."

"If that is your opinion, Rivers," answered Edgar, gravely, "I should think you had better change your course of life a little. You hardly look like a man fit to die suddenly."

Guy tossed off a glass of wine, with a harsh laugh. "Don't you think the devil will take care of his own?" he said.

Edgar shuddered. There was a terrible sound in both laugh and voice. "Guy, my dear fellow!" he exclaimed, "don't speak in that way. I shan't be in England by this time to-morrow night, but I should leave it a happier man if I did so with any hope for you."

"Then all I can say is you won't leave it a happier man, that's all. If you could carry away from earth all that's there," he added, with a motion of his hand in the direction of the deanery, "and my memory with it, there might be a chance for me, not otherwise;" and with the words he rose and abruptly left the room. Edgar saw him no more. He was off to Riverston before he was up in the morning; and before night Edgar Darryll himself was far away.

Guy Rivers left the neighbourhood again without going near Atherley Park, and Pauline turned pale when she heard it.

"It is very strange Guy should have done so, my dear," said her mother, anxiously.

"Papa must write at once, mamma, and make arrangements with him about the marriage."

"You had better write too, my love."

"Of course I shall; but make papa write, mamma."

Mr. Lisle wrote accordingly, and Sir Guy's answer was satisfactory enough. He showed no signs of flinching, only said that he quite agreed with Mr. Lisle that, if the marriage was strictly private, there could be no objection to its taking place in the course of two or three months. To Pauline he excused himself by saying that he could not possibly bear at present to remain longer in the neighbourhood.

"It is too vexatious," Mrs. Lisle said; "you will be obliged to wear mourning for a few months after you are married, my dear; and your dresses will be out of fashion before you can put them on."

"It can't be helped, mamma; so there is no use in thinking about it," Pauline answered. Her spirits had risen considerably since the arrival of Guy's letter. She had not hoped he would consent to the marriage taking place so soon.

"And it is so provoking, too, to be obliged to have a quiet marriage. I had quite set my heart upon its being so gay, and now I don't suppose we shall be able to have any one at all."

"What does it matter?" Pauline answered, a little impatiently. "There will be plenty of time for gaiety afterwards. In some respects I am

not sure it is not better the marriage should be quiet."

Still Mrs. Lisle sighed over the disappointment of not seeing her daughter married with a splendour befitting her future position, and felt rather injured by Mrs. Darryll having chosen to die at that particular time.

The dean made another attempt to induce Maud to leave home at once, after Isabel's funeral was over.

"Surely, my child," he said, "there is sufficient reason, in this sad affair, to account for your leaving home."

Maud shook her head. "Please don't ask me to go yet, papa," she said.

"Are you wise in thus persisting, Maud?" he said, rather gravely. "Remember, the marriage must be put off now. I think you would do well to reconsider your determination, and think whether you are not carrying it rather beyond the bounds of reason."

Maud looked much distressed. She saw her determination was against her father's judgment, and yet she could not bring herself to yield; but his anxious look and tone brought her to a resolution to tell him the whole truth.

"I am afraid you will think me still more

foolish, papa," she said, "if I tell you really why I don't wish to go."

"I would much rather hear the whole truth, Maud," he said, rather perplexed as to what she could mean.

"The whole truth is, then, that my reasons for wishing to stay here are but a small part of the cause of my wish to do so."

"What do you mean?"

"Simply that I have a feeling I can neither understand nor define, that I cannot go until the marriage is over. It seems very foolish to give way to it, does it not, papa? but I cannot shake off the impression that, did I go, I should never cease to regret it. Still, if you wish it very much"— she paused, and then added firmly, though with evident effort—"I will go at once."

"No, I certainly do not wish it while you have that feeling," replied the dean; "though I wish you could shake it off."

"That I *cannot* do," replied Maud, decidedly.

CHAPTER X.

FOILED.

NEARLY three months had passed since Isabel Darryll's death, and Pauline Lisle's wedding day was drawing very near. She had rallied from the temporary depression of spirits the unexpected postponement of her marriage had caused her, and felt rather inclined to laugh at her own folly, in having supposed it could possibly be of any consequence. She thought she might have known her own powers better.

As her spirits rose, she began to share a little in her mother's regret that the marriage must of necessity be so quiet, and she bestowed a good deal of consideration upon the subject. So very tame an affair seemed but a half-triumph, after all. Yet she dare not quite outrage all propriety so far as to think of any great festivities.

To Mrs. Lisle the subject was one of unceasing

regret. There could be no doubt that Pauline would make a beautiful bride. She could well bear the test of even so trying a dress, and the county papers would have been quite ready to chant the praises of both her beauty and the splendour of the festivities.

It was the loss of this chance of attracting notice in so desirable a manner which chiefly grieved Mrs. Lisle. She was really proud of her daughter's beauty, and far too astute not to understand the full value, in this world, of a flourish of trumpets. The Lady Rivers whose beauty and splendid marriage had been the subject of a nine days' wonder in the county would certainly have had an advantage over the Lady Rivers who had been almost privately married, because of the recent death of her husband's sister.

All this time Guy Rivers had never been near Atherley. He went back to London directly after Isabel's funeral; and since then Pauline had heard of him, first in one place, then in another, paying farewell visits, he told her, to his bachelor friends. Occasional proofs of his remembrance of the duty he owed his future wife arrived from London in the shape of splendid presents for Pauline; proofs of his

affection which Pauline certainly appreciated considerably more than she would have done any more personal marks of the same.

But if Pauline thought that all looked fair and promising, it was more than others thought. People were beginning to speak with very grave looks about Sir Guy Rivers; and it seemed as if the prophecies already uttered had a fair chance of fulfilment, that Pauline might find herself shining in rather lonely splendour at Riverston. Lord Bellingham had stayed rather late in London, and when he joined his mother and sister in the country, he was full of the subject.

"I say, mother, that fellow Rivers is up in London again, and going the pace like anything. There's hardly any one fit to speak to left, and he's taking up with a horribly low set."

"I am very grieved to hear it," his mother answered; "but I have been afraid, for some time, he was getting among a very bad set."

"I should rather think he was. You don't know how bad. He's going to the dogs altogether. I really don't think you'll be able to receive him next season, mother."

"He'll be married before then. I do hope that may save him."

"Married!" retorted Lord Bellingham. "Well, I have heard queer things, from some of the people who come from that neighbourhood, about Miss Lisle; but I can only say that, if she does marry Rivers, she must either be precious ignorant of all that's going on, or precious queer."

"Is it really so bad as that, Bellingham? I was in hopes his marriage might check him."

"He is going on in such a way, mother, that I tell you plainly, if he does not make a change before next season, Ethel shall not speak to him."

"I cannot understand it," Lady Bellingham replied. "I had always been afraid about him, he was so terribly excitable; and yet he went on very well until the beginning of this season. In fact, when we saw him in the winter, I thought I had never seen any one so improved; and now, just as one hears he is going to be married, he suddenly takes to all these bad habits. It seems very strange."

In many another country-house similar remarks were being made, and Mr. Feversham carried the news down to his wife, when Parliament broke up. Mrs. Feversham was more grieved and surprised. She imagined that Maud

Vernon had refused him, and had attributed the sad change in him to his disappointment at that.

"Surely," she said, "the Lisles cannot know what is going on."

Mr. Feversham's only answer was an expressive shrug of his shoulders.

"They are strange people, certainly," continued Mrs. Feversham; "but surely they would never let the girl marry him if they knew all this. It is a terrible prospect for her."

More stragglers from London brought fresh accounts of Guy Rivers' wild doings; and, at last, Mrs. Feversham determined to tell Mrs. Wellwood all she had heard, and leave her to judge what should be done. She could hardly believe the Lisles could allow the marriage if they knew all.

Mrs. Wellwood was horror-stricken; quite as much distressed about Guy Rivers himself as about Pauline.

"No, indeed," she said; "I am sure they cannot know it. I cannot approve of all that has gone on, but I am sure, if they knew all this, they would not allow Pauline to marry him, without some enquiry into the truth of all these stories. I know my niece is very worldly

and ambitious, but I am sure she would not see her daughter sacrificed like that. Surely, no mother could, Mrs. Feversham."

Mrs. Feversham smiled, rather sadly. She knew more of the world than good old Mrs. Wellwood did, and felt by no means so certain on the subject; though even she could hardly believe the Lisles knew all.

Mrs. Wellwood determined to lose no time in seeing her niece, and telling her what she had heard. Bitterly as she had been disappointed in Pauline, she did not carry her really just resentment against her to the extent of feeling entirely indifferent to her future welfare; and to her the truth of even half what she had heard about Guy Rivers would have been quite enough to have made her rather wish to see any girl she cared about in her grave than his wife. Mrs. Wellwood, in her old-fashioned simplicity, had no faith in gilding, and not the slightest belief in its powers to shield any woman from the inevitable contamination of occupying so degrading a position as that of a profligate's wife. But then Mrs. Wellwood was very ignorant of some of the indispensable requisites of modern society.

Mrs. Lisle was very much astonished, and not

very much pleased, when she learnt that Mrs. Wellwood was in the drawing-room, and wanted a private interview with her.

"What can she want?" she said to Pauline.

"You had better go and see, mamma," Pauline replied. She felt a little nervous.

Mrs. Wellwood was very straightforward, and thought that in such a case it was useless to beat about the bush; so she simply told her niece what had brought her, and gave her a clear account of all she had heard. Mrs. Lisle heard her with ill-concealed impatience.

"My dear aunt," she said, when she had ended her tale, "do you really mean that you have given yourself the trouble to come all the way from Riverston to tell me all that?"

"Ah! then you have heard it already?" said Mrs. Wellwood.

"No, indeed, I have not. I have not heard a word of the kind, nor can I really, aunt, in any sincerity say I thank you for telling me. I would really rather not have heard it."

"Rather not?" repeated Mrs. Wellwood, in a tone of bewilderment.

"Most certainly not. I do not in the least believe it."

"But you will at least make Charles make some enquiries?"

"I shall certainly do nothing of the kind. My dear aunt! you have lived so long in retirement, you do not understand. People always get up these ill-natured stories about men who are going to be married. I have no doubt Guy has been rather wild; and I daresay now he is not leading exactly the life of a hermit; all young men are the same, but they settle down quietly enough when they are married, and I have no doubt Guy will do the same. I think it is just as well when they do take a good fling, and sow all their wild oats before they do marry. I must confess I have more faith in masculine satiety than in masculine virtue."

Mrs. Wellwood sat aghast. She had never heard her niece express her sentiments quite so distinctly before.

"Then do you mean that you will really allow this marriage to go on without making any enquiries into the truth or falsity of these reports?"

"Certainly, I do. I should consider it most impolitic, and in the worst possible taste, to take the slightest notice of them in any way."

Mrs. Wellwood rose, with a stern look on her face, not often seen there. "Then, Louisa,"

she said, "I can only say, may God forgive you, and grant that you may not live to witness the ruin of your child, and feel that you have helped it on. It is worse than useless for me to stay here longer." She left the room without another word.

"What did Aunt Wellwood want, mamma?" Pauline asked, with some anxiety, when her mother joined her; for the expression of her face showed she had been somewhat ruffled.

"She has picked up some scandal about Guy," replied Mrs. Lisle, "and came over in a fit of virtuous indignation."

"No; you don't really mean it?"

"I do indeed, and she went off in a rage because I would not consent to institute a formal enquiry into his proceedings."

"How extremely absurd! Why, how unsophisticated she must be!"

"She is a perfect simpleton, my dear. But really, Pauline, if half what she has heard is true, you will have to take matters with a high hand with Guy from the first."

Pauline smiled a half-contemptuous smile. "I have managed Guy pretty well as yet, mamma, I think; I don't think you need fear that I shall fail when I am his wife."

"No, my dear, I am not afraid; only you must be on your guard, you know."

Some stories of the same kind as those which had so distressed Mrs. Wellwood had found their way to Stowminster, and even got within the deanery. The dean had heard them with deep sorrow, but chiefly with an anxious dread lest they should reach Maud, which, however, he believed they had not. He was wrong there; Maud had heard some of them at least, though she said not a word; but it was very, very hard to bear. It would not be for long now, however. One more week, and she would be far away from the deanery—never to return, she fully believed; and far away from the terrible spectacle of the hopeless degradation and utter ruin of him she had so dearly loved.

Guy came down to Riverston about a week before the marriage; but never near Atherley did he go, nor did any one see anything of him. What he did with himself all day, no one knew, save Mrs. Parsons and the butler; and they knew well enough that he did very little except drink brandy, and that his occasional outbursts of temper were something awful in their violence. That the other servants knew as well, for it could not be concealed.

The marriage was to take place on Thursday; and by Monday a wild set were assembled at Riverston; come, they said, to support Rivers through the trying ordeal that lay before him; and the old hall rang with sounds such as had never, at least within the memory of man, been heard there. A farewell bachelor dinner they had declared was the proper thing, and Guy had given orders accordingly for Tuesday evening. It could hardly take place the very evening before the marriage. With many tears old Mrs. Parsons had superintended the preparations, and with a firm determination that the day which saw Pauline Lisle enter Riverston hall as its mistress should see her leave it for ever.

Harry Lisle had come and brought some boon companions with him, and declared his full intention that, as it was all up with Rivers now, they would have a regular night of it on Tuesday. He would have the whole of Wednesday to get over the effects, and get his nerves steady against the next day; and guests from the neighbourhood were not wanting ready enough to back Captain Lisle's resolution. Guy was ready enough for anything, as long as it did not give him a moment's time to think.

More than one labourer, crossing the park the following morning, in the scarcely dawning light of the still autumn day, started, and paused for a moment to listen, as sounds of wild revelry came floating across from the hall, and then pursued his way with a sigh. That was not the way that the marriages of the Riverses were wont to be celebrated.

It was still hardly light when grooms and stablemen were all aroused by the sound of eager discussion in the stable-yard, and by the voice of Sir Guy himself, calling loudly to his head groom to come down directly. The man obeyed, and found his master still in evening dress, standing in the middle of an excited group.

"Put the saddle on Rosamond directly," he shouted, "and saddle another horse for Mr. Digby, any one will do, and bring them round at once to the hall door."

"You had better wait a few hours, Rivers," said Mr. Digby, who seemed the least intoxicated of the whole lot.

An oath was the only answer, and Sir Guy strode off, with an unsteady step, towards the house.

In a few moments the horses were at the

door. Sir Guy appeared almost instantly. He had changed his dress, but his bloodshot eyes, swollen features, and trembling hands, told too true a tale of the night's revelry. A noisy group assembled round the door, all talking at once, and hastily booking bets. It was not without some difficulty that Sir Guy succeeded in getting into his saddle; and then, after one more ineffectual attempt to turn him from his purpose, young Digby himself mounted and followed him. The rest, after a few moments' more animated discussion, separated, to sleep off the effects of their wild orgies, and all was quiet within the house.

Doctor Marsh had hardly finished dressing that morning when the sound of horse's feet, urged to the utmost speed, made him pause to listen, and then almost start, as the sound ceased suddenly at his own door. He had so long given up practice, save in a very few instances, that he was little accustomed to such interruptions of his repose now. He opened his door, and met his servant just coming up.

"You are wanted directly, sir," he said.

"Who by?"

"I don't know, sir; the man is at the door."

The messenger looked like a farm-servant;

but the panting horse Doctor Marsh recognised instantly as a hunter belonging to Sir Guy Rivers.

"What do you want with me?" he asked.

"Come over directly, please, sir, to master's place."

"Who is your master?"

"Mr. Pearson, sir."

Doctor Marsh started. The name roused so many memories. Pearson was the present tenant of the farmhouse where Lady Clara Rivers' body had been carried.

"What's the matter?" he asked, with a beating heart.

"Sir Guy Rivers is there, sir, badly hurt."

"How?"

"I don't know, sir. I was at work in the backyard this morning when I heard master calling. I went to see, and he was standing at the door, looking quite scared, with a gentleman I didn't know. This horse was standing by, and master told me to mount directly, and go and tell you to come to Sir Guy Rivers, who was badly hurt, and not to mind pressing the horse. That's all I know, sir."

In a very few moments Doctor Marsh was on the road. The place was not more than six

miles from Stowminster, so it did not take him long to reach it. Young Digby met him at the door. He was perfectly sober now, whatever he might have been before.

"I am so glad you are come," he said; "I am afraid it is a bad case. Come this way."

Doctor Marsh followed him, without asking any questions—followed him to the very room to which he had been led so many years ago. It seemed to him now as if it was but yesterday.

A moment's glance at Guy Rivers left little doubt on Doctor Marsh's mind that there was but little he could do. He was lying perfectly still, with his eyes closed.

"I am afraid it is the back," whispered Digby; "his lower limbs seem quite paralysed."

Guy opened his eyes at the sound of his voice, and instantly held out his hand, with a smile, to Doctor Marsh, such a smile as Doctor Marsh had not seen on his face for long.

"I'm saved, doctor," he said.

Hardly noticing the strange words at the moment, Doctor Marsh bent over him.

"Where are you hurt?" he asked.

"I don't know; but I can't move anything excepting my head and shoulders."

A very short examination sufficed. There was no room for doubt or hesitation. His back was fatally injured. There was nothing medical skill could do.

"Tell me the truth, doctor," Guy said, looking earnestly up at him; "how long can I live?"

"Not very many hours," replied Doctor Marsh, in a low tone.

Something very like a gleam of satisfaction passed across Guy Rivers' face for a moment; but then it faded in an anxious pained look, as he turned again to Doctor Marsh.

"Doctor, will you answer me, truly, another question?"

"I will."

It did not come for a few moments, however, but his face worked. Then he asked, in a low whisper—

"Was my mother mad?"

Doctor Marsh with difficulty checked an exclamation. "What makes you ask such a question?"

"Something I heard in London, a few weeks since. It can't matter now, doctor. Speak the truth."

"Not exactly," he replied, "but something very near it."

"Ah, then I understand all now," Guy said, and he did not speak again for a few moments. Doctor Marsh was terribly perplexed, and at last, rather in dread, he put the question—

"Ought we not to send to Atherley?"

A positive scowl crossed Guy's face as he almost thundered—"No." Then again, his expression suddenly changed to one of intense sadness, and he said in a trembling voice—

"Send and tell the dean, and ask him to come. Don't you think he would come *now*, doctor?"

"I am certain he would."

"Then send at once, and——"

"And what?"

"Nothing. Send for the dean."

Doctor Marsh left him under the charge of the kind-hearted wife of the farmer, and, after sending off the messenger, turned to Mr. Digby.

"Now tell me how all this happened," he said.

"It's a sad story, Doctor Marsh; but thank God *I* did all I could to stop him. There was a terrible wild revel over there last night. I don't want to disguise my own share in it. We had all been drinking deep, but I don't think this would have happened if it hadn't been for

my unfortunate brother, and that fellow Lisle. We all got talking about our horses, and Rivers was most enthusiastic about that mare of his. He declared she would beat any horse in the county at jumping, and Fred got rather nettled, and said at last, with rather a sneer, 'I suppose you think she could take you over Hardcastle's leap.' I never saw anything like the effect the words seemed to take on Rivers. He turned as white as a sheet, and asked Fred what he meant. Fred said he meant what he said; and then Lisle, who was as drunk as he could be, broke in, and urged Rivers to try. Fred said he daren't. It seems Rivers had some superstitious idea about the place, and Fred had got hold of it, somehow. At last it ended in Rivers swearing he would try, and that he would do it at once. I tried to stop him, but it was no use; he seemed perfectly mad; so I went with him. I don't believe one of the others could have ridden if they had tried. I think the dread of what would happen had sobered me. I was quite myself by the time we reached the spot, and I tried again to stop him. It seemed only to make him worse. He put the mare at it again and again, but she refused it. I never saw a man use a horse so cruelly, he seemed

turned to a perfect fiend. At last she took it, pitched on her head, and rolled over him. I thought for the moment he was killed; and from the time I saw how powerless his lower limbs were, I feared what had happened. How thankful I am I tried to stop him."

"You may well be that, young man," replied Doctor Marsh, sternly; "for his death will lie at the door of those who urged him to this."

"Is there no hope?"

"Not a vestige. He can't live twenty-four hours."

The dean had just gone to the library after breakfast when the messenger from the farm arrived, and briefly explained his errand.

"Come to Sir Guy Rivers, at Pearson's farm?" he repeated in astonishment, thinking the man must be drunk. "Who sent you?"

"Doctor Marsh, sir. Sir Guy has been badly hurt by a fall at Hardcastle's leap, and the doctor says he can't live many hours, and he wishes to see you, sir. Doctor Marsh sent that, sir," he added, handing the dean a card, on which was hastily pencilled in Doctor Marsh's writing, "Come instantly!"

"Order out the dog-cart, directly," the dean said to the footman, who had lingered in the room.

"No, papa," said Maud's voice from behind him; "the close carriage, please. I shall go with you!"

She had entered the room, unseen by him, and been a silent listener to all that had passed.

The dean turned with a start. "My child, you must not think of it."

"Yes, I must, papa. Order out the close carriage, Robert."

The tone was not to be disputed; the man disappeared, and the dean yielded. Maud was ready in a few moments, and was sitting waiting perfectly calmly in the library when the carriage came round.

Guy Rivers lay perfectly quiet for some time after the departure of the messenger for the deanery; but more than once he looked at his watch, and when more than an hour had passed, he became rather restless, and a hectic spot came to his cheek. At last, he suddenly raised his head slightly from the pillow—it was almost the only movement of which he was capable now—and listened. To others all seemed silent, but his ear had caught the distant sound of wheels. It drew rapidly nearer, and then before long followed the sound of footsteps in the passage. Sir Guy listened intently for

a moment, and his face became radiant. "I knew she would come," he murmured. The door opened, and in another moment his arms were clasped round Maud once more. There was no need to speak words of reconciliation. One long kiss told that the cloud had passed, and the closing scene of life should be bright again. The dean and Doctor Marsh silently withdrew, and left them alone.

"Maud! Maud!" murmured Guy, "mine in death, though not in life."

"Why did you not ask me to come?" she said, almost reproachfully.

"How could I dare to ask it? Besides, I felt you would come to tell me you had forgiven me."

"Don't talk of forgiveness, Guy. Did I not tell you I could never think a harsh thought of you?"

"Yes, I know you forgave me from the first, and I think that made me worse. Oh, Maud!"—and his brow contracted again—"no one on earth can tell what I have suffered. My life has been a perfect hell on earth since ——" he paused with a shudder.

"Don't think of it now," she said. "All that is past. You were more sinned against than sinning."

"No, no, my darling; it is not so. You don't know all. I had had a warning you know nothing about that might have saved me, but for my mad folly in staying away from your blessed influence, and so letting the evil nature get the upper hand, until—but I can't bear to think of that night. Good God! how I suffered; and then the next—Maud, I saw you that night; I came and stood for hours on the lawn, watching you through the open window, and feeling you were lost to me for ever. I could understand, then, what a lost spirit would feel if he could see into heaven."

"Guy, dear Guy," she implored, "don't think of it."

"Yes, I can think of it now; aye, Maud, and be thankful too."

"Thankful?" she repeated.

"Yes. I understand it now. I accidentally heard something in London; never mind what, but it put the finishing stroke to my ruin, or, rather, would have done had I lived. You little know what an escape you have had."

"I know it all, and have done for long," she said.

"What! about my poor mother?"

"Yes."

"Maud! and you would still have been my wife?"

"Yes."

"And I threw away such a love as that," he murmured. "Oh, Maud! Maud! and brought all this on you. And yet, thank God your life was not linked with mine. What might it not have brought upon you, and the curse might have descended. Thank God, too, that, any way, I have not lived to leave a child behind me. If only I had not brought such sorrow on you."

"Don't think of that, Guy. All that is past. I can think of nothing now but the blessing of seeing you look as you do, once more, after these long months of weary pain."

"Pain of my inflicting," he said.

"Not wilfully inflicted. I understood it all, and it was not only that you were lost to me. That I could have borne; but to see you sinking as you were. Oh! it was that that was so dreadful. How dreadful I hardly realised myself till now. But the wound is healing fast, now that I see that look upon your face once more."

She might well say that. The stamp of death was there; but all that it had been so bitter to her to think of, since the day they had stood

together in the cathedral, was gone. His eyes were clear and bright again, and an almost child-like calmness was on his face. Maud had never seen him look so like his mother's picture as he did then.

For more than an hour she sat beside him, with his hand clasped in hers, conscious of nothing but perfect peace; hardly realising that his life was surely, though slowly, ebbing, in the happiness of that short reunion. He spoke again of the past, and told her, with deep shame and sorrow, of the life he had led for the last few months. But, as if by mutual consent, the name of her whose baleful influence had risen up between them, to his utter undoing, was never mentioned. Yet as Maud listened, she felt a positive feeling of thankfulness that she saw him lying there, dying so calmly and peacefully. It was such a contrast to what might have been.

"It was not only the loss of you that goaded me on to all this," he said at last.

"What was it then?" she asked. "Nay, don't say if it pains you," she added, as she marked the cloud that crossed his face.

"Yes, I will say," he answered, through his clenched teeth. "It was a desperate determina-

tion to have vengeance—a determination that to be my wife should be the foulest degradation that could befall any woman."

Maud shuddered.—"Nay," he said, and the cloud passed, "all that is over now. There is only the better nature left; the nature that belonged to you." He drew her down and kissed her again, as he spoke.

"Will you stay till all is over, Maud?" he asked, after a pause. "Can you, my darling?"

She silently assented.

"Then leave me for a little, and send the dean, and then come back to me."

"Before very long the dean summoned her again, and even in that short time she saw a change. But it seemed as if his face only grew more calm and peaceful as death drew nearer.

"Maud," he said at last, "do you remember what you said that day, in the cathedral—about the ring?"

"Yes."

He did not answer, but untied a ribbon from his neck, and drew the ring off. Then taking her hand, he put it on her finger again.

"I little thought when I first put it there that I should never put another on that finger, though I had a strange boding feeling some-

times; but again I say, and from my heart, thank God that it is so. That ring has never been off my neck since the day you placed it in my hand, and never, in my wildest moments, have I forgotten what you said when you gave it. You gave it back as the pledge of forgiveness; take it again as the pledge, that amid all my madness—for it was madness, I know that, now all is clear again—my true and better self never swerved from faith to you. If I had lived, as long as a ray of reason was left, I should have felt as if you were my true and lawful wife, and she, poor wretch, but a passing toy. May God forgive her all the woe she has wrought."

Maud could not answer, and he did not speak again for some time, but she felt his hand growing colder. At last he said, in a weaker tone—

"It is growing cold and dark. Maud, where are you? I can't see you."

She bent down and kissed him again, but as he faintly returned the kiss, she felt a slight shudder pass over him. She hastily summoned the dean and Doctor Marsh; but it passed, and he lay quite quiet, with his eyes closed, and a faint smile on his face. Maud felt his hand grow cold and heavy in her own; then there

was one long deep-drawn breath, and all was still.

Doctor Marsh bent over him for a moment, and as he rose again, he answered the dean's enquiring look with a motion of assent. The dean silently led Maud away, and placed her in the carriage. They drove for some distance without a word, and then Maud said, with a deep-drawn breath—

"Oh, papa, if I had gone away!——"

"I should never have forgiven myself," the dean answered.

"I prayed that I might hear he was dead," she continued; "and now I can only thank God that my prayer was answered in a way I never dared to hope. I can forgive her now; I do not think I had done it quite before."

She did not speak again during the drive; but she was quite still and quiet, and her fingers seemed ever, almost unconsciously, feeling the ring, as if she could hardly realise that it was there again. Already the dean thought he could see a change in her face. The look of resolute endurance seemed to have passed from it; and there was a peaceful calm expression, even amid its deep sadness, which it was long since her father had seen there.

CHAPTER XI.

CONCLUSION.

The next morning—the wedding day—at the very hour when he should have been standing with Pauline Lisle before the altar, the lifeless body of Guy Rivers was silently borne from the farmhouse to Riverston hall. Maud insisted on seeing him once again, and the dean brought her over. Then, as she stood beside the coffin, with the cold hand clasped in hers, her tears fell fast, but there was no bitterness in them now. She would willingly have stayed there for hours, almost drinking in the marvellous peace which seemed resting on the marble face, even more beautiful in death than it had been in life. The position was changed now. It was the dead face, with its still lingering smile, that was throwing its influence over Maud, and speaking peace to her sorely tried spirit—a peace that

nothing in the future could ever disturb. At last, with one long farewell kiss, she went. And then in a few days the vault, which had been opened last to receive the coffin of Sir Rupert Rivers, was opened again; and the ill-fated son was laid to rest close beside his hapless mother. Guy Rivers' remark to Edgar Darryll, on the day of Isabel's funeral, seemed to have had something of prophecy in it. The blood of the Veres had all passed out of the family the same way. And not one who knew the truth could regret that that branch at least of an old family had come to an untimely end.

Harry Lisle had carried the news to Atherley Park himself; that in spite of all her deep-laid schemes Pauline had been foiled. Her deeds had recoiled upon her own head; and the very spirit she had herself aroused had ruined all her hopes, and shattered at one blow all her brilliant visions, just as it seemed that she was at last secure of the enjoyment of her hardly won triumph. Retribution had overtaken her, and what brought back peace and almost happiness to Maud Vernon, brought Pauline Lisle only the untold bitterness of disappointed ambition, and mortified pride.

The Lisles were gone from Atherley within a

few days after the funeral; and before many months had passed, the papers announced Pauline's marriage to an Italian nobleman; a man older than her own father, and of profligate character. Rumours did, from time to time, reach the neighbourhood, when some of the county families had been abroad for a few weeks, of his tyranny and not altogether causeless jealousy; though Mrs. Lisle always asserted that it was quite delightful to see the perfect happiness of her dear child, and the devotion of the Marchese to her. But when a few years after the fair Marchesa paid a visit to Atherley, people said she was strangely altered. She looked twenty years older, and no amount of paint or hair dye could conceal the ravages which something, it could hardly be time, had made on her beauty.

Maud Vernon did not leave the deanery for ever. She came back after a year's absence, with very little about her to mark through what a fiery furnace she had passed, save the silver threads in her dark hair. There was a change, but it was one more easily felt than defined. There was greater depth, nothing more; greater depth of repose, and greater depth of expression in her thoughtful face, with just the faintest touch of sadness, adding a greater beauty to her clear

brown eyes. But after all, who can describe in words the undefinable charm which suffering rightly borne always leaves behind it? Few people had called Maud handsome before, but numbers called her beautiful now, and wondered how it was they had never admired her before.

She met Pauline once again, and if the faintest shade of bitterness had lingered unsuspected in her heart, it was gone for ever then, as she looked at her once beautiful rival, and contrasted what she was at that moment with what she had been a few years before. And though she would not have avowed it to a single soul, Pauline had never felt so deep a sense of shame and humiliation as she did when she saw the gentle pitying sadness so clearly expressed in Maud's every feature, for the few seconds they stood face to face, during that accidental meeting.

THE END.

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